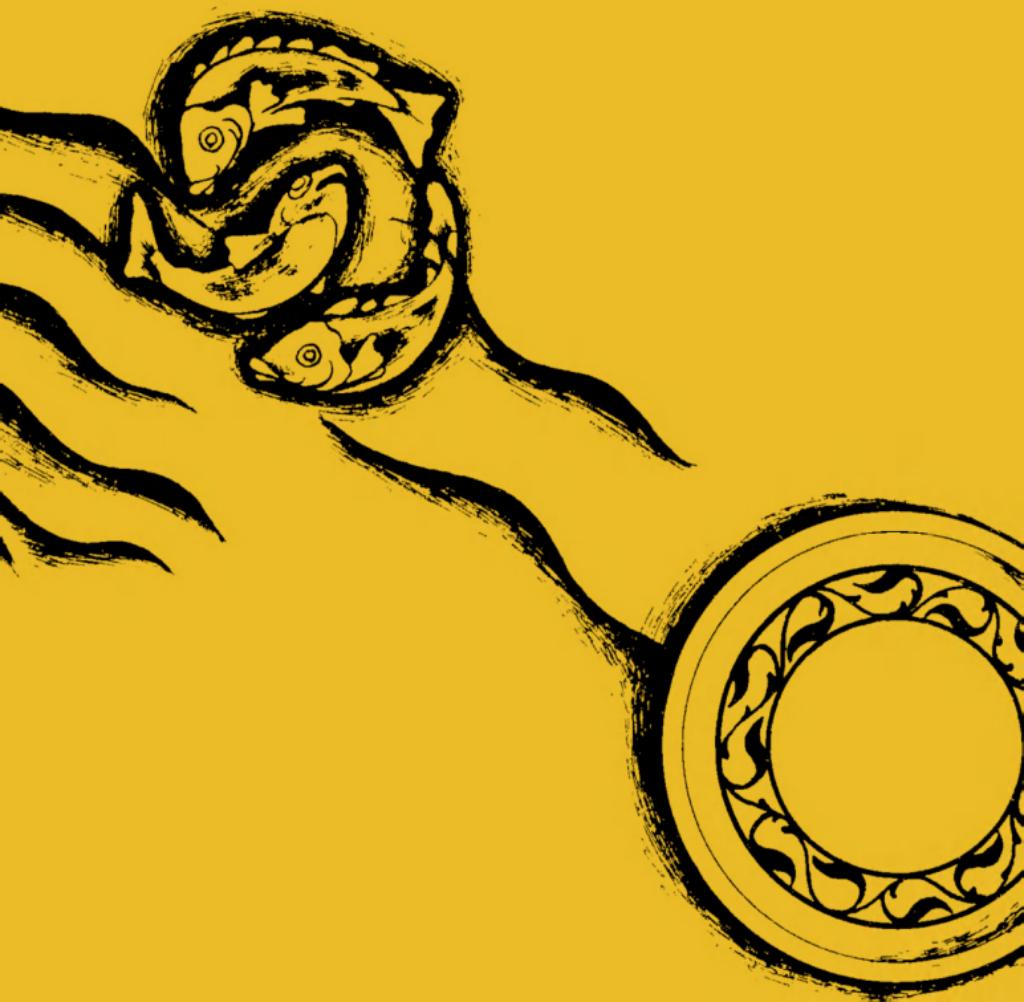


Timur Palatov



The Life Story
of
a Naughty
Boy
from
Bukhara









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Raduga Publishers
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Тимур Пулатов

ЖИЗНЕОПИСАНИЕ СТРОПТИВОГО БУХАРЦА

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CONTENTS

The Second Journey of Kaip.

A Story

7

For the Honor of the Emirate.

A Story

59

The Life Story of a Naughty Boy from Bukhara.

A Novel

75



The Second Journey
of
Kaip



I

Kaip had long since passed the age when death can come from something external -a galloping illness, sunstroke, the bite of a snake or the poison of a fish, blindness or deafness, a cough or the evil eye. Now he simply waited for the day when his fore-fathers would call him.

In the mornings the old man would come out into the courtyard, hang his camel-hide bedding on a stake, peer at the distant hill, and think.

Kaip thought about where that first man had come from, the one from whom everyone of the island was descended. What materials had nature created him from?

At first Kaip had thought that the original man had been made out of a whirlwind. There was a cave on the hill: a sandy whirlwind had leaped out of it and rushed towards the sea, rejoicing in its renewal. It had raced along, crashing into boulders, frightening the kites, until at last, exhausted, it had halted right beside the water.

And there the strivings of the water, wind, and sun had turned the whirlwind into a pillar of clay, and that pillar, to the amazement of the kites, had emerged from the sea as a man.

Once he had been sitting with Yermolai in the meadow, and Kaip had told his friend this intuition, pointing at the hill: a whirlwind was coming towards them.

“Look, it has a human shape,” said Kaip in his quiet, old man’s excitement as they watched the column of dust.

He waited for the whirlwind to come closer so Yermolai could see the sad human face fancifully mimicked in the twisting sand.

Yermolai looked, but he did not see the face. He ran away:

the whirlwind was hurrying towards his house to tear off its roof and doors.

The whirlwind knocked Kaip down and half buried him. And so the old man was half dead –luckily his neighbors dug him out in time, people in whom he had long ago lost interest.

Another intuition came to Kaip from a snake. The old man had discovered it under his bedding and thrown it out into the sun. In the evening he came across the snake once more. It was all dried out except the eyes.

Kaip looked at those eyes in amazement: under the sun the creature's body had parted with all of its juices, and only the eyes remained alive.

He brought the snake to Yermolai. "Look at this. A snake's eyes never die, because they are never sad or surprised at anything." And he showed his own eyes to Yermolai, so his friend could compare them with the snake's.

Kaip knew that the roots of trees were snakes that had crawled into the earth, buried themselves in the sand, which had more life in it than the air. And it was from the sand that the first man had appeared on the island.

Yermolai listened and pretended to agree, although in fact he found the experience of another uninteresting. He lived, as everyone does, through his own experience alone.

And the sea drew farther and farther away from their island. People said: The fish are leaving us. In the same way their ancestors had said: The forest has left us. And still earlier: The river has gone away. They knew that everything weak in nature goes away, making room for the desert.

II

One night, when everyone on the island was waiting for the start of the fishing season, the old man dreamed of a kite. He awakened with a groan and sat up in his bed. Kaip knew that now he would die: the kite was a sign of death.

He had made all his preparations for sailing. It seemed he had done everything: gathered seaweed and put a new roof

on the house where his son and his son's wife would live now, made peace with everyone he had offended in any way, and returned whatever he had taken from anyone. He ate and drank in moderation, so his body would not waste its juices on trifles. And at last he had been able to persuade his son to come back from Akchi, from the factory. Now the son would live with his wife on the island and take the old man's place in work in the house and on the sea.

Kaip was frightened by the vain fuss people made over death. He knew he was simply going to another world, one that was long and wearisome. He knew that good and bad people alike went there, and that the new world was very close, in the sand that was all around.

He worried that when his body had turned into sand his spirit would wander for a long time in his new life, troubling the living.

The wind would sweep him up and scatter him over the island. He would crawl into the sea, and the fish would swallow him, carrying the sand in their bellies and between their fins. And they would bring him to strange cities and oases. He would drift on and on, searching for peace and not finding it till the end of the world.

Kaip knew his time for preparation was short. He must sail today, at once, for Green Island. That was where he was born. He had fled from there to punish Aisha. When had that been? The old man licked his dry lips. Whenever he thought about Aisha he was haunted by the scent of apricots. Why? It had been hot then, and frogs had jumped in the rushes around Kaip.

Not long ago he had met a fisherman from Green Island out at sea. The man said Aisha was alive and all alone. She was still gathering seaweed and baking fish in the sand to sell to people visiting the island.

Kaip's father, like all the rest of his family, was buried on the island from which he had fled.

And now they had called to him. He must get there in time. Green Island could be seen through the mist. It was close by, but getting there would not be easy.

He needed a boat, but he had none of his own. Neither did

Yermolai or any of the others. All the boats belonged to their brigade. And now everyone was waiting for the fish to come. Chairman Aralov had put off all individual trips until further notice.

The village was deserted. For two nights now everyone had been watching and waiting beside the sea. Sheep wandered through the street, glancing into houses and sniffing thresholds.

The men from Bukhara were sleeping on the bare sand. They had thrown ropes around themselves so the scorpions would not get to them.

They were bootmakers. They had come to the island a week back and got stuck because of the fishing season. Practical men, not wanting to waste their time profitlessly, they had spent all the preceding day cutting the islanders' hair, trimming their beards and mustaches.

Vladimir, the Ossetian, moved quietly among the sleepers with a jug. That evening the bootmakers had drunk wine in his cellar, and Vladimir thought perhaps someone would want more during the night.

He greeted Kaip and wandered sadly off towards the light-house to drink the jug of wine with his friend, the keeper.

Kaip started to undress beside a dune of clean, freshly blown sand. When he had stripped off all his clothes he sat down and dug his feet into the sand. He scoured his whole body to get the blood circulating before his journey.

Then he splashed around for a good half hour in the shallow water. Failing to find a deeper spot, he lay down a little ways off shore.

He had left the bundle with his clean trousers and shirt, long ago prepared for this occasion, on the shore. Yermolai's son, Proshka, sat beside the bundle looking at Kaip. He was about fourteen, with the tired face of a grownup.

His father had sent him to visit Kaip and give him fish oil if he was sick.

But the old man was not sick. Proshka sat alone, bored. Finally he threw himself in the water and came over to Kaip.

This time the old man met him with a grumble. Kaip wanted to be by himself.

"What are you—following me?" Kaip stood up out of the water.

"Father said to give you fish oil."

"I don't need it. Take it back. Wait—did you come from the bay?"

"Yes. The brigade-leader was there. He told everyone off and left."

"Are the boats all tied up?"

"All of them. Father's on guard. You want to go fishing?" Proshka smiled meaningfully.

"What if I do? There are others that go fishing."

Proshka exclaimed in surprise. He was still not sure if Kaip was joking or really meant to do some fishing on the sly. Nobody had ever known the old man to do such a thing before, even in the hardest times.

"Go on then," Kaip said mysteriously. Proshka decided from his tone of voice that he really meant to make a night outing and was asking that it be kept secret.

Once he had sent Proshka off, Kaip got dressed and headed for the bay where boats were anchored, hoping no one else would bother him or ask him questions.

Although it was late, all twenty of the families living on the island were at the pier. Families of Kazakhs and Karakalpaks, their close relations. Families of Uzbeks, and Tajiks, and Cossacks from the Urals who had settled on the island a hundred years earlier.

The watchmen had their orders: if they saw a cutter out at sea or a flare going up they were to wake everyone and start off.

The fishermen were to sail to the delta of the river, to North Island, where Chairman Aralov would be waiting. There they would join forces with fishermen from the neighboring islands.

No one was allowed to act on his own or to leave the island for any reason during those days. Stern punishments were threatened.

They were waiting for an enormous school of fish to move past the island towards the river delta, the spawning grounds. They would surround the school and make a big catch.

Not long before there had been a false alarm. When the

fishermen got to the delta they were told to turn around and go home: either the school had moved off in a direction that no one had anticipated, or the pilots had started seeing things in their exhaustion.

Now the families cooked and ate and slept and loved on the narrow pier.

Kalikhan had died there yesterday, of old age.

Kaip hid in the rushes and looked at the sleepers. He could see the watchman, Mosulmanbek, drowsily holding out his smoldering lantern. He was an old man with an evil temper.

The rest of them were shrouded in half-darkness. It was only by their postures that Kaip recognized them. He recalled their names and nicknames: Kashcha, Palvan, Beardless Vanya.

For some reason Kaip remembered how the brigade-leader had come around once to make his inspection. He had hidden in these rushes too, and suddenly shouted at the top of his lungs: "Hey, Kashcha!" The old man dropped the bone he had fallen asleep gnawing on, and all the rest woke up also. Everybody laughed at the brigade-leader's joke and kept shouting, "Kashcha! Kashcha!" They shoved the old man down onto the sand, and he crawled off in shame.

Kaip could hear the sides of the boats rubbing against each other, and the squeaking they made when the wind drove their bows together. The boats themselves were hidden behind some reeds in a little bay, where Yermolai was standing watch. Kaip got out of the water, stole towards Yermolai, and sat down. Yermolai sensed the movement somehow and looked around keenly. His eyes fastened on Kaip and noticed many changes in him.

The deep, salt-stung wrinkles had smoothed out a little, and black hairs had appeared on his cheeks in the dead spots where no beard had grown earlier. His eyes, which looked pleadingly at his friend the watchman, had lost their sickly yellowish color, and the tears no longer oozed from them.

"What's wrong?" asked Yermolai, worried.

Kaip did not know how to begin.

"What is it? Are you sick?"

"I need a boat. I'll be back by morning," said Kaip.

What surprised him was not the ease with which he brought out the lie, although he no longer had the right to do that, but the way Yermolai nodded his consent without asking anything more. Kaip did not know that after his talk with Proshka the boy had come running to his father: "So you see, Uncle Kaip wants to sneak and do some poaching too. And you were always saying he was a saint."

"Keep still. There's a lot you don't understand," Yermolai had said and chased the boy off. While Kaip was making his way to the dock Yermolai had time to think over a lot of things. He did not find any fault with his friend. Finally he had dozed off.

Well, so Kaip really did want to catch some fish. Almost every night the watchmen were approached with such requests, and they would agree to help, taking the risk that the fish would not come that night and the boats would not be needed. In compensation they got part of the night poachers' catch.

"You won't make it back before dawn," said Yermolai judiciously.

"Oh yes I will," Kaip assured him. "Don't worry."

"Make sure you do!" Yermolai added as a final warning. He felt offended that Kaip had not shared the details of his planned outing.

It was hard going out into the bay. They kept getting tangled in the marsh grasses that clogged the shallow water by the shore. And they choked on the swatches of fog that had settled down among the reeds: they would bend the plants aside and find themselves shrouded from head to foot in a cloud that left a sticky yellow film on their bodies.

Then they saw other boats coming in. The men rowed desperately, struggling to get out of the reeds and up onto the shore. They shouted and cursed, and the more worried they became the more they got tangled in the thick vegetation, losing the channel.

Kaip hid, and Yermolai approached the other boats for a parley.

They were from a neighboring island, and had come in answer to a false alarm. They were waiting for the fish, like the

people of Sandy Island, and at midnight they had received an order to come here—supposedly the school was headed in this direction.

Yermolai explained the whole mix-up, and the men from the neighboring island, satisfied, cheerfully turned their boats around.

Their voices could be heard for a long time across the sea, and then there was only the splashing of oars. When they had got a long way off one of the men began to sing.

His voice, muffled and distorted by the sea, was like the cry of some lost bird. Then everything was quiet.

After they reached the boats in the bay Yermolai wanted to sit smoking for a little while with his friend, but Kaip was in too much of a hurry. He pointed to where dawn was already creeping into the sky—the dawn of a day that filled him with concern.

They picked out a big, sound boat and took it off the chain. Kaip fell, slipping on the silty bottom, and cut his chin. But he could not feel the pain.

Finally, when the boat was a long ways from shore, Kaip clambered in.

Yermolai did not turn back. He swam alongside Kaip's boat, pushing it out.

A lantern flashed, as if in farewell, on the island Kaip was leaving forever.

Then another lantern appeared, and a third. Soon the whole shore was alight, as if it were engaged with the lighthouse in a dispute over something.

When Kaip looked around again Yermolai had already gone. Only the splash of water in the distance told the old man his friend had got safely back to shore.

III

Kaip did not have time for regrets, or for memories either. And still less for thinking about the future—that was all unknown.

He kept sailing. He knew every reef here, every cliff, every current.

Soon the boat would be out of the stretch where the island was washed by the sea. It would round the split cliff on which the blind lighthouse stood and move on down the river.

The river was a lazy one, but as it came to the sea its current became swift, jouncing across the rapids. It would catch a boat and sweep it along, spinning it round and round. If the fishermen's arm so much as trembled, or if he looked away for a moment, he might be thrown out into the sea on the third or fifth spin. The boat would capsize, and its pilot would find himself buried under logs and rotten crates. A good bit of courage and adeptness would be needed then to save the boat.

But after that a different, peaceful current would carry the boat all the way to Green Island—quiet and ease!

The respite would not last for long, though. Ahead, in the waters off Green Island, one more trial, the most difficult of all, lay in wait.

Kaip had heard that at high tide on certain days it was impossible to get ashore. The boat would advance smoothly and quickly, and then suddenly lurch off course and be carried inexorably all the way around the island, not moving an inch closer to the shore or farther from it, as if something were drawing the vessel to itself and would not let go, waiting for the ebb tide to begin.

Of course someone on shore might see the boat and pull it in on a line. But usually it was patients from the sanatorium who sat by the shore, and all they could do was to call others, the sound of health, to the rescue—if any such happened to be nearby.

No one could explain the current's tricks on those days. Fortunately, it did not happen often; most of the time the water around Green Island was calm, even dead, and no danger threatened incoming boats.

After two rapid sweeps round, Kaip's boat came out into safe water. The old man pulled his oars in, breathing hard, and lay down on the bottom. He felt feverish. It even occurred to him that he had wasted his last strength fighting the current

and now he would never get up again, would die before his time. And there was so much he wanted to talk over with himself, with the sea on which he had passed his life, with the fish and the gulls.

He thought about his father, Iskhak. "He begot me, sent me off to see the world, and now he is saying, 'Enough then. Come back.' Some day I'll say the same to my son. Probably the members of a family can't do without one another. We'll stay together, like the fish in a school."

And at once a piece of his childhood surfaced in Kaip's mind, the thing he remembered best and kept within himself, guarding its purity and clearness.

"There were no fish that year," he remembered. "There was a storm. The sea is tired, nowadays: when it's angry it climbs up onto the bank and then, thinking better of it, goes back. All it takes is stones and shells—just trifles. It's as if the sea has grown kinder. But that year it wanted human bodies.

"Father was making jugs. Then he sank them in the sea. There was no one to buy them. 'Our Prophet, Suleiman, will seal up jinns in my jugs,' he used to joke grimly.

"He built himself a new house, but kept Mother and me in the old one. Mother was burning up, she wanted his love, but he chased her off. Strange, how the desire stays alive longer in women than in men. Their youthful madness comes back to them in their seventies.

"On the morning after Father dreamed of the kite, Mother and I were working in the courtyard. She thought he was going to gather brushwood and sent me after him with some rope. Old women never know when their husbands are dying. We men don't know either, for that matter. I didn't know when my wife was dying. She left life as simply as she had lived it, just fell asleep and died without saying goodbye. Probably no one calls to the women. The men want to live by themselves in the second life, without bodies or offspring.

"The river had dried up, and the salt crunched under your feet. It was strange how Father walked along the bed, watching his step, afraid of crushing the beetles. That made them brave, and they gripped at his trouser cuffs and scratched his legs.

"Soon he came to the place where he usually laid his traps. He got down on his knees and freed the hare. It was barely alive. I thought he would break its neck, like he always did, and put it in his shirt front, glad of the catch. But he tore off strips of his clothes and carefully bandaged up the hare's hurt paws. He even put herbs on the raw places so they would heal faster. Then he put his tongue down the hare's throat and gave it moisture from his own body to drink. The hare got to its feet, looked around, and went off into the desert.

"Father had lived a long life and destroyed all kinds of defenseless creatures. He had torn up grass and bushes and burned them, dug up the desert and pulled live things out of the sea. He lived the way all shepherds, hunters, and fishermen do, to feed his family. But when he heard nature calling him back he wanted to redeem himself somehow, to restore some little thing in nature and make it as it was before he came—as if he had never lived among us others.

"I was frightened," Kaip remembered. "I ran to him, but he went on watching the hare as it went away. He was half dead already. The part that was still alive helped him stand up. It was as if he still hoped for something. As if he didn't know that only a living man's goodness has power in it, a dead man's just confuses things and makes them worse.

"He went along like that, straightening up bushes and setting different animals free. Meanwhile the wind blew all the warmth out of him and carried it off into the desert. The heat got stronger.

"I started to cry and raced back to our village to call for help. When we found Father he was lying on the sand with the kites circling over him. He didn't even have time to feel glad. The kites had come to eat his body, after all, and that too was restoring the balance of nature."

Kaip was worried now. He struggled into a sitting position and grabbed the side of the boat.

He squinted. Suddenly he had a clear glimpse of Green Island—a huge black cliff in the darkness.

There it was—his native land.

Among the stones and green hills a spring of water gurgled,

surrounded by trees. For someone who was accustomed to the dreary monotony of the sea, the green world of the island was like a miracle, like a recompense for the long journey and the weariness. That was why the weak and sick had been brought from all the sea's shores to the big sanatorium on Green Island.

There were people's voices, too, coming either from the shore or from the depths of the island. And some big machine, working with its cogged wheels, and the knocking of the millstone. Sounds, nothing but sounds.

What would happen there, by the shore? Would Kaip's native land receive him, or would his boat be carried off in a race around the island? Would he die at the very gates of his home? Could there be any more shameful end for a man?

Kaip put his oars in again and started to help the boat along. But that made the boat veer off—it would move by itself towards the unknown, without any human assistance.

Kaip lay down again, feeling tired. What would be would be, he decided. It was no good hoping for anything else.

He lay with his eyes closed. He could tell by the way the water splashed into his face that the current had begun to change.

"If only I have time to see her," he thought. "I'll come out onto the shore. She must be very old. That fisherman said she wanders around outside the hospital, offering smoked fish for sale. I'll find her there. It's a good thing I had time to call my son back to the island, to his wife. It seems I'm getting kinder in my old age. That happens to all of us, when we get tired of life. Only it happens late. I wonder, all those people who have done mean things, betrayed others, do they all suffer? Or are there some whose conscience has died long ago, who go to the grave empty, soulless? As if no one called them to account."

Suddenly he heard a strange noise. The boat had begun to rock violently and was being carried off to one side. Then a voice came, loud and clear: "Halt there, or I'll fire!" He looked over the side and saw a black shape, tall as a cliff.

Kaip wanted to get up but couldn't. The boat jolted again and he fell, banging his head on the bottom. A line was thrown into the boat, followed by an order:

"Tie up!"

Kaip took the rope obediently, but the unexpectedness of it all had thrown him into total confusion. He could not think how to tie it, where. It would be better if they told him, directed him.

Evidently his trouble was understood. The voice began to upbraid him:

"What are you taking so long about? Faster! That's right, crawl. Don't let go of the line, you hear? Forward! Where are you going? Now tie up. Not like that! Make a knot, a knot!"

Once the line was tied to the bow it went taught. The noise started up again, and the boat started to move.

The old man was overjoyed—he was saved! They must have noticed him on Green Island and come to help. It must be their profession to bring boats through the danger—pilots.

He felt ashamed. Here he was lying down while others did all the work for him. He decided to get up and do what he could to help. But try as he might to stand, the waves struck him in the face and shoved him down again on his back.

He only had time to notice that he was being towed by a cutter.

When the orders had come from the cutter it had seemed there were dozens of people on deck. But now for some reason it was empty.

Where had the crew gone? Maybe once they had done their job, taken Kaip's boat under tow, they had all dived in to swim after him. Just in case. After all, Kaip might fall out of the boat, it was moving so fast. And then they would be right there, ready to save him from drowning.

But somehow it seemed to take a long time. Kaip banged his head against the side many times and nearly lost consciousness. He clung desperately to his hope.

They should have got to Green Island by this time.

What had happened? Could it be that even big cutters were unable to get ashore when the tide ran high? Could it be that

the crew had abandoned the cutter, leaving the captain to find his own way out of the difficult situation?

Kaip wanted to do something, to be of some help to the captain. He would do anything rather than give up, would die only when it was senseless to struggle any longer...

IV

Meanwhile the cutter had safely reached a nameless island, designated in reports as K-34. It entered a little bay and cut its engines. Kaip's boat rocked for a little longer and stopped too.

"Get out!" he was ordered.

Kaip obeyed. His head was still spinning.

The man who had given the order was almost twice as tall as Kaip. He was already standing in the water with a rifle. If Kaip tried to run he would fire a warning shot.

"Get up onto the shore. And no tricks. It won't do any good."

It was full dawn.

Kaip looked over the little island, trying to understand where he had been brought. It was barren, about fifty paces in length, with a lighthouse and a little white building standing alone beside the hill. The old man remembered it at once.

The man (Kaip had never seen him before) jumped into the boat. He was searching impatiently for something inside. He threw the oars back from the bow into the stern.

"So you managed to throw everything overboard," he said, but went on looking.

Kaip did not even try to understand what the man wanted. He did not care about anything now.

"Aha!" cried Ali-Baba (that was the man's name), delighted. "Just one, but it's still evidence. Look!" He had found a dead fish about the size of his little finger. It had probably been tossed into the boat by a wave. He showed it to Kaip so the old man would know he had been caught. Then he wrapped his find up carefully in his handkerchief, as if it were a gold coin

from the time of the tsars, recovered from the sea bottom, and hid it away.

"You saw how small it was?" Ali-Baba went on. "Well, it's still big enough to put you away for two whole years."

Kaip listened to what this odd stranger had to say and headed for the shore. He was tired of standing in the water.

"Where are you going?" Ali-Baba hurried after him. "Are you resisting arrest? Halt! You'll move when I tell you!"

While he was still sputtering indignantly, Kaip reached the shore. It occurred to Ali-Baba that there was no sense now in making him return to the water.

Once on the island, Ali-Baba ran ahead, giving orders:

"Follow me! You won't get away from here. And if you do, you'll drown. Which would you rather death, or two years in prison?"

Kaip decided not to bother with an answer. At last he had understood that the man was a fisheries inspector, a guardian of the sea.

"Not saying anything? That's all right - you'll talk when the time comes."

Kaip felt only a flicker of interest in the man, and then fell back into his dullness. The stranger was stupid and arrogant.

A stuffed golden eagle sat atop a pole by the door of the white building. When the man opened the door to go in, the eagle swayed back and lost a feather.

There was a single room with a table. On the table was a radio transmitter. Each of the four windows held instruments for keeping watch over the sea during storms, or when the fisheries inspector could not be bothered to go outside.

"So this is my fortress," said Ali-Baba, sitting down at the table. He said that with warmth, a note of humanity. He was glad to share his solitude with the old man.

Kaip nodded in answer, as if approving the living arrangements.

"Well so," said Ali-Baba, pulling out the fingerling wrapped in his handkerchief and putting it on the table. "Who are you, and where do you come from?" He peered intently at the old man, trying to remember if he had detained this fisherman

previously. "Not talking?" No, he was sure he had never seen this old fellow before. That made him frown even more: if he had never caught this man, it meant that up to now his thieving had gone unpunished. That was why he was behaving this way—he felt superior.

All right, then. He would get revenge for the undiscovered crimes of Kaip's past. He was sure there had been plenty of them.

"It's people like you that have depleted this sea," Ali-Baba said. "Where are our renowned bream? Our wild carp, our barbels? Answer me!"

Kaip stood looking out the window. Only fragments of what was said reached him. He could not concentrate. Only one clear thought came to him, and that was that he did not care what the stranger thought about him. His conscience was clear, and whatever Ali-Baba might say had nothing to do with him.

"What island are you from?" asked the inspector.

Kaip told him, and Ali-Baba radioed Sandy Island right away.

"Listen," he told the brigade-leader. "I've got one of yours here. I'm going to make out a report and take him to Akchi. You ought to be doing a better job of convincing your people this sort of thing won't do them any good. Do you get my meaning?"

Nepes, the brigade-leader, cursed angrily when he heard the news, but Kaip could not tell what he was cursing although he strained to hear—the voice on the radio was coming from Sandy Island, his home.

Of course every poacher who was caught was a feather in Ali-Baba's cap. At the end of the season, if the island's catch was not as large as had been planned, he would get up at the meeting and say that poachers had gotten all the fish. And the brigade-leader and chairman were mainly to blame: they had failed to do sufficient educational work to break the islanders of their thieving.

"All right then," said Nepes. "I'll call everybody in to talk this over. Listen, though—you know the season is just about to open..."

"Don't even bother to ask," interrupted Ali-Baba. "I'm

not letting him go! Enough of that! I can't go breaking the law for you all the time."

"But I promise," came the answer. "As soon as we make our catch we'll start the investigation on him. Please, just take his signature and let him go. We need every man, every boat. They'll have my hide!"

"No! This time I'm doing everything by the book! You've let things go too far, do you understand?" Out of either genuine anger or a desire to flaunt his power Ali-Baba ended the conversation abruptly by snapping off the transmitter.

He turned to Kaip and said: "So you heard. We're going to put you on trial. I'll make up the report now, and take you on in to Akchi." He pronounced the second half of this slowly, thoughtfully.

He was wondering if it was really worth the trouble to take Kaip in to Akchi. He would have to make up his report, to drag the information word by word out of this taciturn old man. Then put him into the cutter. The trip would take more than two hours; it would be afternoon before he handed Kaip over to the police. The rules said the fisheries inspector could summon the shore police to the island, but usually these routine matters were handled on the regular trips, every third or fourth day. A poacher was not a murderer, after all.

And if he were to take the old fellow in, there was still no guarantee the police would not repeat word for word what the brigade-leader on Sandy Island had said: We'll start the investigation once the catch has been made. We'll take your man's signature and release him. Let him help out with the big job.

Right now everyone was mainly concerned with the catch. All the rest was secondary. Laws and rules could be bent, just as long as nothing got in the way of their work. The canneries in Akchi were waiting for fish.

After he had thought about all of this, Ali-Baba called Sandy Island again.

"Say, what's the latest on that school? When is it finally going to come, damn it?"

"The pilots say soon," Nepes answered. "We're expecting to hear any minute."

“What’s running, bream?”

“Who knows? If it was, we could meet all our quotas for valuable species.”

“It ought to be bream, it’s got to,” said Ali-Baba with conviction.

“Hope you’re right. I’ll send you some samples from our first take,” Nepes promised. Then he asked: “Who is he, the man you caught?”

Kaip said his name.

“Kaip, he says. Do you have a Kaip?”

Again the brigade-leader cursed angrily.

“What’s got into you, Kaip?” he asked in bewilderment. “We used to hold you up as an example of honesty. And now you’ll be appearing before the judge! ”

But Ali-Baba broke off the heart-to-heart chat. “Stop coddling him like that! You ought to keep even your best men strictly in line. What made him decide to break the law?”

Kaip wanted to answer Nepes, but then thought better of it. It was beneath his dignity as an innocent man to offer excuses. “You’re right, of course,” agreed Nepes so as not to complicate matters. “He’ll have to stand trial. But why doesn’t he say anything? Make him speak up. Is he all right?”

Kaip knew that Nepes was sincerely concerned, and so he said quietly from his corner:

“I’m all right, Nepes.”

“Did you hear?” asked Ali-Baba.

“Just let him dare come back here,” Nepes said menacingly. He wanted to turn off his transmitter—everything about this affair infuriated him.

“Hold it, hold it! How is he going to get back, have you thought about that?”

“Let him come the way he left,” was the answer from Sandy Island.

“If he runs away you’ll take the blame.”

“He won’t. He’s got a conscience. I’m sure he’s already sorry for this.”

“Let him be sorry. We’ll help him,” said Ali-Baba.

“Sure we will. Goodbye! ”

It was getting on towards noon, and Kaip was still the guest, or rather the prisoner, of Ali-Baba. Before he took a poacher to Akchi, the inspector always showed him over the island, whose situation and features were the special pride of its occupant.

"If you'd wanted to run away, old man, you would have drowned," said Ali-Baba as he brought Kaip to the south shore, where a precipice plunged down to the sea. "See how high it is here? Let's say you jumped anyway. You'd break your legs. Look down there at the sharp rocks sticking out of the water. No, you couldn't escape from this side. Let's move on."

When they came to the other shore, Ali-Baba pointed out a blindingly white sand dune. It hurt your eyes to look at it.

"That's rock salt up at the top," he explained. "Let's say you ran away from me, wanted to climb up there. The salt would cut your hands to ribbons. See that spot on the slope? Blood. It was that eagle you saw outside my house. He got fuddled in the mists and fell down from there, dead."

Kaip was so tired he sat down on the sand. He had known all this for a long time. But Ali-Baba continued to regale him with the dangers of the trap island so cunningly wrought by the sea.

"The only place you could escape from is this inlet," he said, sitting down beside Kaip. "Where my cutter is. Nothing in the way, the sea close by, deep water. Looks inviting, right? But that's only looks. There's a current sneaking along offshore, about fifty meters out. At first you might think it was just fine—the current carrying you along, no need to strain at the oars. The easy life! And it would go on like that for a long, long time. Finally, when you were completely off guard, maybe even starting to doze sweetly, the current would catch the boat, spin it round once or twice, and then turn it into your grave."

V

Kaip steered his course once more for Green Island. He thought that now no more foolish accidents could befall

him. After being captured by Ali-Baba, he felt certain he would not meet the inspector again.

There might be other, natural obstacles, like the current, submerged rocks, or shoals, but there was no reason to fear people any more. Nepes, maybe: he might get worried over Kaip's long absence and send a barge out to look. Or he might not. He might forget all about it in the bustle of getting ready for the season to open.

Kaip had left Ali-Baba's island at noon, when the sea was dull and dirty-looking with black spots from the waves. Sometimes when the wind died down the water seemed to freeze. It would look like a jelly cut into sections—that was the surface current moving. As the sea grew shallower, there were more and more such currents.

Kaip no longer rested, only bent over every so often to scoop up some water and splash his face. His head was spinning. He was hungry.

How was he to know the voyage would take so long? He would have brought food and drink.

For a long time the sea was deserted—no gulls flying, even. This brought sadness, memories. Kaip could not run away from them, any more than from himself.

"It was in 'fourteen, in the days of the beys and the landowners. A lot of the Russians had gone home to fight. They took some of our men with them. I was left behind to look after Mother. How old was I then? Twenty. That means Aisha was eighteen. Karimbei would be as old as I am now.

"Whenever the son of the cannery owner came to our island from Akchi it would make me afraid somehow. My worrying would get the best of me, and I would say stupid things to Aisha. Once I told my mother to hide her in the shed. I had the right to kill her, my betrothed. I paid her father half a boatload of fish each month for her future sufferings.

"Karimbei would come to our island to hunt and fish. I think it wasn't so much he himself as his two friends that scared me—two big young fellows in expensive clothes who hardly ever said a word. They had curved daggers from Bukhara in their belts.

"Karimbei was kind, and had good manners. He always brought along a boatful of presents, all sorts of things that none of us on the island had ever seen: vodka for the old men, fruit and sweets for the children, beads and fancy goods for the women—all the things that were sold in his father's store in Akchi. Karimbei would call us together on the meadow and hand out his gifts.

"People would say how kind and generous he was. Everyone took what was given and went home.

"Once he gave me a watch and explained what it was for. It's on the bottom of the sea now, somewhere between Green Island and Sandy Island.

"From the looks of things, Karimbei didn't like his father. Once he told the people that when his father died and he became the owner of the cannery he would buy fast ships from the Russians and pay us twice as much for the fish we caught—then everyone of Green Island would get rich and there wouldn't be any more hunger or sickness.

"That last time he came, he gave Aisha some long earrings from Bukhara. And it seemed to me he paid special attention to her. Those friends of his started whispering to each other. They had something on their mind.

"When they had gone deep into the island to do their hunting I called Aisha to come with me into the thick bushes behind the spring. I don't remember any more what I said, what I wanted from her. Maybe I demanded she throw those earrings away. I don't know. The main thing was to shout at her, I didn't care what for. I was very upset, as always.

"We quarreled a lot, and especially after the son of the cannery owner started making trips to the island. I was to blame for it all, with my restlessness, my quick temper. Aisha always listened without a word, no matter how cruel or unjust my reproaches were. She would cry quietly, go off into the thick bushes where no one could hear her.

"That day she looked at me with sorrow in her eyes, as if she was pleading with me to be fair. She must have felt somehow that a bad thing was coming.

"She was more sensitive than I was. She foresaw a lot of

things I was blind to. She knew when an eclipse of the moon was coming, or some sorrow. She lived all in nature, close to God.

"I said all sorts of mean things to her. And left her behind in the thick bushes, went off to the meadow and lay down there in the sand. I was waiting for her to come and ask my forgiveness, the way she always did.

"It was a stifling day. There was a mist coming in from the sea, and it hung lower over the sand. There were frogs hopping all around—the fog had driven them out of the water. I listened to them wailing and moaning. A kite flew out of the thickets and circled overhead.

"The sun and the fog relaxed me, and the frogs croaking made a sleepy sound. I drowsed off. I wasn't asleep, but I wasn't awake either. Whenever I was like that I started seeing strange things. That time there was a grimacing face, and a lame horse that got into the water and started to swim, holding its head up as if it was scared. I shuddered and woke up, then drifted off again.

"I lay like that for something less than an hour. Finally I got worried. I stood up and looked around. There was that special sort of quiet, when even your own fear has a sound.

"I tried to call out for Aisha, but my lips and throat had dried out while I was asleep. Instead of a shout only a croak came out.

"I headed back for the place where I had left her. I was horribly thirsty. Even the slightest movement made my head swim; the fog must have drugged me. I cursed myself for my weakness, for having fallen asleep on the sand.

"Those bushes were all around me, gray and bare. They had dried out a long time before and turned hard as stone. Even the wind stayed away from them. I realized I was lost: I had been walking for a long time and couldn't find the little clearing where Aisha and I had been sitting.

"I found myself in a spot where the bushes were so thick you couldn't see two steps ahead. I went forward a little ways, but couldn't see any better. Suddenly I was face to face with

Karimbei and his friends. They came out of the bushes towards me.

"Karimbei and I were embarrassed. When his friends saw me, though, the expression drained out of their faces. Although I thought I could see mockery in the corners of their eyes, contempt.

"I nodded to them and wanted to rush off. But before I could make a move Karimbei started to run, crashing through the bushes as if he had seen the Devil himself.

"I was too surprised to do anything. The other two stood there looking at me, smirking, instead of hurrying after the son of their master. I could tell they were thinking ominous thoughts. I threw myself on my knees, begged and pleaded with them for mercy.

"So they took pity on me. They dragged me off to one side, lifted me up onto my feet, and shoved me off into the bushes. I fell on my face in the sand, jumped right up again, and ran off. There was a thick wall of bushes all around—no one could have heard voices, shouts. I was lucky they didn't decide to beat me."

Kaip was worried. He pulled his oars out of the water. In his gladness at having gotten away from Ali-Baba successfully, he had not even wondered whether his boat was going in the right direction.

He had thought the current would carry him to Green Island. His boat tilted a little to one side, the way it did when it was moving straight ahead.

A long time had passed, and now Kaip saw on the horizon the shape of an island he did not know. He realized he was lost.

He started to think what to do: go on to the island or head back. He could go back to Ali-Baba and ask him to radio Sandy Island. Yermolai could come for him. Without food or drink, Kaip might lose the little strength he had. They could return together to Sandy Island, and the next night Kaip could set out once more for his native shores.

No, that would not do. The inspector would suspect he was up to something. And who could tell how long he would detain Kaip.

What would be would be—Kaip made for the island. Fisher-

men would not bother a stranger. They did not know him, would not ask him anything, suspect him of anything. Kaip would find out how to get to Green Island. And ask for something to eat.

Not wanting to come in to shore, he stopped his boat when he was still some distance away and lay down to have a look at the island and the men in the boats and barges.

The island was white and smooth as a piece of ice. Unlike Sandy Island, which was quiet and sparsely populated, it showed clear signs of life. Two or three machines were scooping up salt, and the boats and barges were hauling it away.

When one of the boats came near, Kaip asked whether anyone on it knew the way to Green Island.

An argument started: one man pointed right, another left. It was remembered how they had brought salt to that island, and something else. They disputed for a long time, and nearly got into a fight, so eager were they to help Kaip.

Kaip listened to all they said, and understood that not one of them had ever heard of Green Island. Perhaps his honored friends could show him the way to Sandy Island?

Sandy Island? Of course! And again they fell to arguing, pointing in different directions: one towards Akchi, another to the north, where the Kazakh steppes were.

The argument ended only after each of them had given Kaip a slice of bread and some fried fish. They gave him a jug of water too, and invited him to spend the night on their island. In the morning he could continue his search with renewed strength.

Kaip thanked them and sailed on.

It was the first time he had eaten in all those hours. His hands trembled as he broke the bread, and he swallowed without chewing.

Now only luck could bring his boat to Green Island or Sandy Island.

When he had got a long ways out from shore, Kaip looked around and suddenly remembered that he had sailed past Salt Island once before.

It was long ago, in his childhood. His father, sensing that

death was near, had decided to sail around all the islands, to look on his native land and say goodbye to it, and had taken Kaip with him.

On his first voyage, Kaip had seen no people on Salt Island. Now a new industry had brought settlers to it.

The sea here was busy, full of life, and gulls whirled silently above Kaip's boat. It seemed they were following the movements of the fish, trying not to rouse man with their cries, wanting to hide their secret from him.

Soon another inhabited island came into view. Two old men, wanderers by all appearances, were sitting on the shore with their feet hanging down into the water. They were dozing after their long journey. Then a third appeared and dragged a sack ashore from a boat. He spent a long time untying it, and then pulled out a dry flatcake. He broke it into three equal pieces and went to waken his companions.

They grumbled and waved him away sleepily, but finally resigned themselves and began to eat the flatcake.

Then all three of them were lost from sight.

By evening Kaip had sailed past dozens of islands, big and little. He remembered many of them from his first voyage, but there were others too, barren and unpeopled, which had emerged from the sea only recently.

These were tiny islands, formerly reefs and underwater cliffs, which had lifted above the surface together with their seaweed and fish. The wind had not blown all of this off into the sea yet, and it seemed to the old man that the plants, hearing the sound of his oars, lifted their heads to see who was disturbing them.

Kaip went all around most of these islands, looking at their shores from every side. It was interesting to look at places that not long ago had been part of the sea's bottom, the graveyard of boats and men.

Kaip noticed that life on the bigger islands had changed a great deal in the half century since the fishermen took power for themselves. Where drifting sand had been, new settlements and factories had appeared. There were barges and larger vessels at the docks, loaded with salt, tin, and granite. In those places

where people no longer waited on the sea's bounty there was bustling life and an air of plenty.

The fearful marshes had already disappeared from the river deltas on the islands. In the old days their vapors had carried sickness among the villages. The marshes had been drained and planted with rice.

Kaip sailed from island to island, noticing changes everywhere.

The people on the shores who watched the solitary boat and saw the lean old man dressed in white, with his long beard, argued and made guesses. Some maintained he was an ordinary poacher, and wondered at his bravery: stealing fish in broad daylight was as perilous as, say, venturing out onto the sea in a storm. Others argued he must be one of those who had decided, at their own risk, to search for the three fishermen who had gone out a week earlier and never come back. Many people were simply baffled, not knowing what to think. And they shouted after Kaip.

He did not hear them. He had withdrawn into himself again, seeking not comfort but truth.

"I ran and ran, breaking my way through the bushes. It was only when I got home that I noticed how swollen my face and hands were. Mother pulled out the thorns and stickers, and bathed my scratches.

"I ran for a long time. Finally I couldn't go any farther. I stopped in a little clearing and fell down. My fear was gone. Now I could think over calmly what I had seen in those thickets. I couldn't understand what had happened to Karimbei, why he was suddenly frightened of me. And why his friends, his faithful bodyguards, had acted so strangely. Maybe they wanted to beat me because by chance I had seen their master's weakness. So I wouldn't tell anybody.

"I was so agitated I didn't even think about Aisha, about how I had abandoned her there in the thickets. I was too busy with my own troubles.

"I sat there for a long time and finally I heard a faint moan. Yes, somebody was moaning, it was a human voice. I still couldn't get to my feet. I crawled in one direction, then in

another. I stuck my head through some bushes, looked around, and crawled back. In the darkness among the bushes my hands found a turtle, and I shouted in disgust and flung it aside, although I had never been afraid of turtles before.

"Something snapped close by me. I crawled in that direction, then recoiled in horror: a woman in torn clothing was lying there among the bushes, moaning.

"I didn't recognize Aisha right away. I tried to convince myself it was someone else. No. No, it was a bad dream. I called to her, the other one, my own Aisha. I shouted, but in answer all I heard was the moaning of the woman lying in the bushes.

"And suddenly it was all gone. All the sounds, the wind too. There was a sort of choking emptiness everywhere. I was indifferent to everything. Something had broken in me, sunk, and I said a silent farewell to what had kept my soul warm and full. There was an awful emptiness in me.

"Aisha looked at me, but there was no fear in her eyes, no plea, none of the devotion that used to be there. Only tiredness.

"I sat beside her until morning."

During the night a thick cluster of lights appeared on the horizon, and Kaip realized his boat was approaching a city. By the outline of the lights he judged it to be the fishermen's capital, Akchi.

VI

Kaip looked over the distant port and decided to turn back. It was dangerous here—he might be noticed. But it was not easy to get away. Seiners and barges passed his boat from time to time. Their horns sounded to warn the old man, bells rang, lanterns were flashed into his eyes.

Kaip was nearly run down by a small passenger steamer. Then the patrol cutter appeared, and someone with a bullhorn shouted at him.

The old man rowed in one direction, then in another, but

wherever he went they chased him off. He was in everybody's way.

Kaip cursed himself in despair for his ineptitude. Then a shout came—he was saved:

"Uncle Kaip!"

He looked around, and among the multitude of vessels spotted a barge from Sandy Island. Proshka was waving to him.

Kaip hurried over to the barge. Proshka got down into the old man's boat to help him tie fast. The boy was always calm and collected, like his father, but now he fussed over everything, not taking his devoted eyes off the old man.

"It's usually Father who comes for the salt," he said in a grownup voice. "But yesterday, when they found out he had been on guard when the boat was stolen, they took him off the job and sent him looking for you." Proshka inspected the boat with a businesslike air. When he was satisfied it had suffered no damage, he went on: "I was supposed to go back this evening. But I had an idea that if you had got lost you would be carried in here, to the port. So I waited. There are so many different boats here it makes you dizzy. They wait for the season to open all day, and sleep out at sea at night. Do you know if the season has started, Uncle Kaip? I'm afraid Father and I will miss it."

Proshka helped the old man get up into the barge.

In the voice Yermolai usually spoke, he said:

"Well, praise be to God! It's a good thing nothing has happened to the boat. Everything turns out for the best."

With what sounded like the last gasp of the old barge's horn they were under way, with Kaip's boat in tow.

From time to time Proshka would lean out of the cabin and shout, for Kaip's amusement, at other pilots:

"What's wrong with you? Did you swallow a fisheye, like a drunk? Yes, I mean you, my friend! Do you want to kill yourself? Stay clear of my barge! Have some fear of God!"

Kaip sat contentedly in a corner and listened.

Then he grew sad, remembering how he had lied to Yermolai. Now his friend was out at sea somewhere, shining his lantern on everything that looked like a lost boat—logs, rotted crates—and asking everyone he met if they had seen a crazy, stupid old

man who could not lie or steal like a sensible human being, who brought suffering on himself and others too, who had said he would be back by morning and then disappeared the Devil knew where, and it was already more than a day now.

Everything was in an uproar on Sandy Island; the incident was the sole topic of conversation. The men who stole fish themselves were amazed, censorious: How had Kaip dared? The time he had picked! —everyone in a fever of excitement, waiting for the school to come, every boat counted, every man on the spot.

Ha ha, the wise and noble Kaip, never harmed a fly, the best fisherman on Sandy Island—now feast your eyes on him, hankering after stolen fish. That proved it: everyone who was good and noble was rotten inside.

Yes, of course they would say those things. He had lied about trifles, naturally, as he had lied to Yermolai the night before. There was no getting along without that, no living in this world. But those trifling lies had gone unnoticed or been forgiven. Now something big, something shocking had come to the surface.

Proshka had long since fallen silent. That meant the barge had got out of the bay into the open, unpeopled sea.

Kaip decided to sleep for a while. But before lying down he asked Proshka how long it would take them to get to Sandy Island.

“We’ll just make it by morning,” Proshka answered. “You sleep, and I’ll keep a sharp eye out. Maybe we’ll pick Father up too. He’s exhausted by now, I’ll bet.”

“He’ll already be back on the island,” he said to calm the boy.

“No. He said he wouldn’t come back till he found you. You don’t know—he’s awfully stubborn. But not as stubborn as I am—I found you first.”

“Yes. You’re a good boy.” Kaip spread out the sacking and lay down.

As soon as he shut his eyes there was a ringing and buzzing in his ears, and waves leaped before his eyes. The water rippled and white islands swam by ... islands... Faces peered down at

him, smiling, grimacing, winking meaningfully as if they were about to share some important secret. In a word, everything the old man had seen in his day and night at sea came back to him.

This had never happened before. His eyes were used to the sea, and he had long since stopped dreaming about it.

The pictures disappeared when Kaip opened his eyes, but the sound in his ears went on, though more faintly.

It was more than sleeplessness—a nightmare brought on by his recollections of Aisha. And Kaip thought that he would certainly die when the night came again.

He got up, swaying on his feet, and made his way to Proshka's cabin. He needed to have a living person beside him now.

Kaip saw that the barge's searchlights pierced the fog only with difficulty: even at night the fog continued to rise from the sea.

But the barge moved along lightly, Proshka was not afraid of hitting anything, so he did not ring his bell.

Other vessels, though, invisible in the darkness and fog, sounded their signal horns every moment. And to Kaip the noise seemed to be coming from the gate-keepers of hell.

Now, more than ever before, he wanted to live. He needed at least another twenty-four hours: tonight and the following day.

"How long can you live on the sea without water?" Proshka asked. He was worrying about his father.

"You can drink fish juice."

"What about the tiredness?"

"No matter how tired you are, the current will finally carry your boat ashore."

"But what about reefs? Submerged rocks?" Proshka refused to be quieted.

"Only big vessels have to worry about reefs. Not boats."

"You mean it's impossible to die at sea? How can that be?"

"A man can die if he's an enemy to himself," Kaip answered evasively.

"Father was never that," concluded Proshka. He thought for a little while, then asked: "Aren't you tired, Uncle Kaip? Go get

some sleep. The season might start tomorrow, and then none of us will have time for sleep. Even if it doesn't, there will be work to do. They'll make us grind up this salt. We'll sit on the shore and work on it with those little mills. You know, the ones for fishmeal. Will they do the job, Uncle Kaip?"

Kaip nodded: the mills could grind salt too.

"Of course Father would have gotten ground salt in Akchi. He has friends at the warehouse. They led me by the nose, though. Oh well, we'll get by with this stuff."

"Listen, Proshka," interrupted Kaip. "You must know Green Island..."

"Of course I do. I've been there quite a few times. Boats go down there sometimes, you know."

"Is there a direct route there?"

"No, only by way of our island. I don't know any other route."

"Think about it, Proshka."

After a little silence, Proshka said:

"I thought about it, Uncle Kaip. We might try going to Green Island first, and then home. But I'm afraid we wouldn't make it by daylight. People will say Father has run off, and now me too. They'll say the whole family is no good."

What if they were to try it? Kaip himself would steer the barge past the reefs and rocks. But it was as if everybody on the sea was plotting against him. No one would tell him what he needed to know, show him the way to Green Island. It was as if they knew why the old man wanted to go there and out of kindness did not want him to leave the world of fishermen and hunters, of simple people. Simple people were never a burden on one another.

Kaip knew that if he went now to Sandy Island it was unlikely he would be able to get away again before the season opened. Nepes would order the watchmen, under pain of death, not to give him a boat. They would set Kaip to breaking up the salt, dragging sacks around, and mending the nets. And he would work conscientiously at those tasks until suddenly he stumbled and fell.

He needed to get to Green Island as quickly as he could, by

any route, fearing no one and stopping at nothing.

But what about Proshka? If the boy did not bring the salt barge into Sandy Island by morning, things would go badly for Yermolai. In ordinary times he might have been able to get off, to say he lost his way. But now, at the very height of their working year, when the salt was needed for drying the fish, there could be no excuses. Proshka was right: they would say the whole family was no good.

No, the old man had no right to make trouble for the living. Yermolai had already suffered because of him.

Proshka was so tired he could barely keep his feet. Time to spell him.

Kaip took the wheel, and Proshka lay down on the sacking after asking the old man to keep an eye out for his father's boat.

Kaip heard Proshka murmuring and sighing for a long time, unable to get to sleep. He was still worried about his father.

At last he drifted off, but in a little while he woke up again with a groan. He had had a bad dream. He looked anxiously at the sea and then went back to lie down. Kaip's memories still would not leave him in peace. He was tired now, afraid to think back. He tried to think about something else, about the inspector's island, for instance, where the beys who bought fish and sold it to the canneries had held him prisoner, trying to force Kaip, whom the people of Sandy Island respected, to convince them to sink their boats and tear up their nets rather than hand them over to the cooperative. The old man thought of many different episodes in his long life: those middlemen-beys, and his son, wounded in the war, whom he had brought back from Akchi on a boat (he had got lost that time too), and the sad time when he, the brigade-leader, had been brought before the court: fish were being stolen on Sandy Island, and no one had caught the guilty parties, so Kaip had been called to answer for it. Whatever time in his life he recollects he felt that he had been right, however much others had tried to prove him wrong. Except for that story with Aisha, in his youth, he had been honest and just, had not caused anyone pain.

On the contrary, it had always been he who suffered for his justice, and it was only his wisdom that prevented him from becoming angry and making new mistakes, for which he would have had to answer to himself later on.

"I couldn't live on the island any more then. I decided to leave. Not because people were talking, were making accusations and laughing. No one knew then. They only started to find out later, after many days had passed.

"I thought all of us—Karimbei and Aisha and I—were to blame for what had happened in the thickets. Wasn't I right to be concerned? I warned Aisha, after all, even locked her up at home. But she must have encouraged Karimbei somehow, and so that terrible thing happened.

"One evening I came into the clearing where everyone was sitting and told them I was going away to earn some money. Aisha was to wait for me, to marry another only if my body were found in the sea. Once everyone had seen I was dead, she would be free again.

"The next morning, while I was still sleeping, making myself strong for the long trip, Aisha went running around the island shouting to the silent old women sitting on the boulders: 'He's going away, my joy, my betrothed!' That was the way girls on our island saw off their betrothed: Aisha and I had to carry out the ceremony of departure.

"One of the women caught Aisha by the hand and whispered threateningly: 'Call him an outcast. He is an outcast now!'

"That was more than Aisha could bear. She cried out, and hid her face in her long sleeves. The women pushed her towards my house. They kept saying 'You're not the first, not the only one'.

"Aisha was afraid. The women's eyes were burning, they were desperate for revenge. Several of them rushed into my house and started to waken me, pounding on my back. I groaned. They hit me in the face with their dry, black hands. Then they kicked me, and their legs were as dry and black as their hands. Despairing old women whose age no one could tell. It was as if they had been born that way, had been old and ugly all their lives.

“They wanted to take revenge on my youth—it was only the men on our island who were young or old. When they were tired of beating me they led me out into the courtyard. I had no right to resist. I was leaving the island, and according to the custom a man who was going away, abandoning his betrothed, had to be beaten by strange women and his own betrothed.

“I lay down in the sand to rest for a little. Only the sheep took pity on me—they came up and sniffed me all over. Aisha came out and looked at me. ‘It’s time to get him up,’ she said to the women. There was no compassion in her voice any more. Her face had twisted up, and now she wanted revenge too—it was enough for her to see the old women beating me.

“The women reached up with poles and took down the dried sheep carcasses hanging on the walls of my house. Meanwhile Aisha prepared a drink to revive me: sheep fat mixed with bark and seagrass. All at once she started to scream again, as she caught my look: her fear and compassion had returned. But the old women looked at her accusingly, and right away she hurled herself at me, straddled my chest and shouted curses.

“The old men were sitting nearby, on the clearing. There was soft, pristine sand there, brought in overnight from some distant part of the island. That sand made you lazy, a sort of pleasing languidness came from it. ‘It’s warm here, good,’ I heard someone saying. ‘Yes, this sand was someone’s body. The warmth in people doesn’t disappear when they die,’ another voice agreed. ‘Death purifies everything,’ a third man said. ‘However dirty a person was in life, his sand is always clean. It’s strange.’

“Someone pointed towards me. ‘His father was a foul man. But last winter, in the desert, I found his remains. I wanted to take them into a cave to bury them, but when I lifted them they crumbled. I was amazed: the sand was white.’

“The old men were black, with grim, wrinkled faces. They looked at each other from under their brows, out of their narrow slits of eyes. They let me into the middle of the circle. I

stood there, hanging my head.

“The women brought meat on trays made from clay. They sat down with the men, and Aisha went round the circle with the tray. They ate silently, greedily. And threw the bones at my feet.

“When they had eaten and pronounced ‘Peace to the Wanderer’ I would gather the bones in a sack, load it into my boat, and sail off with it. I was supposed to carry those bones until I came back home, so I wouldn’t forget my ancestors. If I forgot, my corpse would be eaten by fish in the sea.

“They ate all the meat and looked up at me. I walked around bent over, picking up the bones and putting them in the sack. Every once and a while I would look at Aisha. I was satisfied: I had suffered my retribution. I could see she was suffering terribly. She must have guessed what I meant to do.

“Aisha helped me lift the sack. It was heavy: they had eaten four sheep. Then the old women drove me out of the village. It was hard climbing up onto the dune, and I kept falling down. I reached the graveyard with my last strength. Death is a chance thing, and they had chosen the most neglected spot for the island’s graveyard, without any thought of beauty or the eternal preservation of remains.

“I still had the sack on my shoulders, and Aisha came after me, with the women. We walked around looking for the grave of our first father, the founder of our clan. All the mounds looked the same, and no one could be sure which one was really it, but finally an old woman said, ‘Here! ’ We all got down on our knees.

“An old woman poured a pitcherful of water onto the mound, and everyone started to dig in the sand, mixing it with the water. ‘Repeat after me! ’ said the old woman. ‘I am leaving the hearth to which I was born...’ I shut my eyes and repeated the words as mournfully as I could. The old woman’s hands touched my face, rubbed my forehead, cheeks, and lips with the clay. ‘If I forget my native land I shall die and be eaten by the fish...’

Aisha had done everything as she was supposed to, but

when she heard that she suddenly began to moan.

“‘If I kill anyone, let my eyes be put out by a blinding storm,’ I repeated after the old woman. Aisha sobbed and began to hit me on my back. ‘Forgive me! ’ she screamed. The old women hurried to pull her off me, but she clung to my legs, kept begging for forgiveness. I got up and ran away from the graveyard. And kept running till I came to my boat on the shore. I rowed and rowed without stopping, farther and farther from the island. I left Aisha behind forever, to pay for her sin with suffering and loneliness.”

VII

Proshka’s sleep was restless. He groaned and kept rolling over. He lay on his belly, then on his back, and then rolled up in a ball. His arms must have gone to sleep after that: he kept tossing them about, looking for a more comfortable position. Proshka always slept badly at sea. The moonlight bothered him, gave him troubling dreams.

He dreamed of Green Island, of how boats could not come in to its shores at high tide. And afterwards they climbed up to the moon on the white road its light spread out, sailing and sailing upwards to dissolve in the mist.

Kaip was wide awake at the wheel. He had regained his composure.

For a long time the barge had moved through half-darkness. Now it came out onto the moonlight’s road.

The road was white in some places. In others it had a dull sheen, and in still others it was gray with green spots. It began at the far bank and went all the way across the sea to Sandy Island, where it lit the faces of the sleepers beside their boats at the dock. Then it climbed back into the sea and stretched in a white bridge across to Green Island, after which it moved on across thousands of other islands to the opposite shore, into the steppe and to the cities beyond, connecting all who lived on the earth in an eternal brotherhood.

Now Kaip, too, was sailing along that road.

At first his hands were uncertain, but they quickly grew accustomed to the wheel. The old man was calm: he knew that towards morning the barge would arrive at Sandy Island and Proshka would be greeted by his family.

But what about him, Kaip? What would he do once they got back to Sandy Island? Where would he get a boat to sail once more for Green Island?

Perhaps his fathers had called for him too early. Perhaps he had not yet lived out the days allotted him.

Yes, it seemed the more obstacles he encountered on his voyage, the braver and stronger he became. He overcame them all.

Proshka was worn out, but he, an old man, could work right through until dawn without feeling tired. Death had withdrawn for a time from its struggle with life. The desire to stand upright, not to fall, was still strong in the old man, but after all none of this could last forever.

He had to go on. While he still had the will he must sail for Green Island. Tomorrow. If he could not get a boat he would try it on his own, swimming.

There was no need to think so much now about that. What he needed to do now was get the barge to Sandy Island. The fish might come any time, and if they did not get this salt ground up all the islanders would find themselves in trouble. It would be no good asking who was right and who was wrong: the green fish, bloated with the heat, would be buried in the sand, and hungry dogs would roam the village, trailing fish guts after them.

Kaip sighed, and returned to his sad, unhurried recollections.

"I settled down close by, on Sandy Island. So as not to be a stranger here I married a local girl—the old men brought her for me. Everyone thought I was a cheerful, carefree fellow. I laughed often and with no good reason, sang songs out at sea, wrestled in the sand with others my age, and got into a lot of fistfights.

"At the bazaar in Akchi I bought myself a foxskin hat and

yellow boots. I strolled on the bank in them, trading quips with our island beauties. People laughed good-naturedly at my foolishness. I would grow up, become sensible, settle down like everyone else, and be a good fisherman.

"Since then I haven't been back to Green Island once. Family, cares, the birth of my son... And then times got very complicated. It wasn't easy to understand what was happening around you those days.

"All the do-gooders who loaned money at interest disappeared from the islands, all the middlemen. And with them went deceit and poverty. All the islands joined together. Work brought people closer to one another, and former strangers were joined in one big fishermen's cooperative.

"Yermolai persuaded me to make a trip with him to get revenge on Karimbei and his friends for what they had done. I would never have thought of doing such a thing on my own—I knew by experience that revenge was not the best reply to an injury. And by then I knew something else, too: sooner or later everyone, thinking over his life, comes to purification. If there isn't time in this world, he'll be purified in the new one, the one he will go to.

"When we got to Akchi we learned that Karimbei's father, the cannery owner, had been killed by the people he once oppressed, and Karimbei himself had been exiled to an uninhabited island. The time had come for him to do some thinking too."

Little by little the road of moonlight dissolved, sank to the bottom of the sea. The dawn broke.

There was one more island to pass, and from there it was just a little ways to Sandy Island.

The little island, sleepy and cool, appeared suddenly on the left. The idea came to Kaip that he ought to get off here: he could obtain a boat from a relation who lived here.

"Proshka," he called.

The boy was not sleeping soundly any longer, just dozing. He got up quickly.

"Oh, there's Sulphur Island already." He felt a little embarrassed and cursed himself for sleeping the whole night through,

not relieving the old man. Seeing that the barge was moving a little off course, towards the island, he asked in a puzzled voice:

“Have you decided to take on water, Uncle Kaip?”

“No. I’m getting off. You can see Sandy Island from here.”

Yes, that island on the horizon now was it.

“Turn the boat over to your father. Say that I...” Kaip wanted to say he was sorry about what had happened, but he decided Yermolai would understand.

“So you’re leaving?” asked Proshka, disappointed.

He did not dare ask why. That would have been impolite.

VIII

The relation Kaip had remembered about was Aralov, the chairman of the cooperative.

His house was no different from the fishermen’s: half of it was sinking into the sand, there were gaps in the thin walls where the wind blew through, and the seaweed roof, long since rotted, stuck up in bunches as if someone had been at it with a pitchfork.

The fishermen had offered to fix up the chairman’s house on one of their free days, to put a new roof on it, and had already collected the seaweed. But Aralov kept putting them off: later, sometime after the fishing season.

The people on Sulphur Island knew that Aralov had been thinking for a long time of quitting, retiring. They knew, and were afraid. They were too shy to offer him advice, but quietly, without talking about it, they arranged things so that he would have no excuse for leaving them.

Aralov had been born on Sandy Island, but it was only seldom he went there. Usually he sent his deputy. The attitude towards him there was different, not so affectionate.

When Aralov appeared on the other islands, the fishermen would accompany him on his rounds - the brigade-leaders,

inspectors, and outstanding workers in front and the rest bringing up the rear. They would show him their village and their accomplishments, their boats and nets. On Sandy Island, everyone remained sitting on the shore, talking about whatever came to mind, and Aralov would wander around by himself, checking up on things, hopping over the brushwood fences and beating off the hungry dogs. When he had seen everything, reckoned it all up, he got silently back into his cutter and left.

Somehow it made the people on Sandy Island uncomfortable to think that Aralov--himself a fisherman, the son and grandson of fishermen, whom they had married off, taught to swim in the sea and to tell a bream from a sturgeon--that this same Aralov, who did not have horns or the wisdom of Solomon, had been placed over them as their leader.

Indeed, they wondered on Sandy Island whether they needed Aralov at all. The fishermen themselves pulled in their nets at the proper time, pursued the schools, and took as many fish as the sea gave, not a fingerling more or less. How could it be otherwise? It was their work, and if anyone did not want to work he was the one who would suffer, not Aralov. The chairman would not go hungry.

Of course if the chairman had been anyone else, they would have followed on his heels when he came to Sandy Island, looking eagerly into his face, smiling when the big man smiled, laughing with him when he laughed at one of his own jokes.

They all remembered Saparov, the previous chairman. He would not stand for the hint of a sneer on anyone's face. He would stamp his foot and withdraw proudly.

Aralov was chairman for many islands, big ones and little nameless ones. It took an entire week just to get a general idea of how things were going throughout the area.

And before a month had passed he would hear again from the pilots that a new islet had emerged in the cooperative's waters, a recently surfaced reef or rock.

He would go to look it over, measure it, see how it affected the current and how deep the water was off its banks, think

about how this new bit of land could be used profitably.

The new island would alter the migration patterns the fish followed too. He would have to sit down and work all that out, change the plans for future catches.

Kaip was sitting on the porch. He had not been able to get to sleep in the chairman's house. He saw Aralov coming through the darkness, stumbling tired.

"What are you doing here, old man?" he asked the stranger sitting peacefully beside his house.

"I'm Kaip. Your mother's cousin."

"Come inside!"

Kaip was worried that Aralov would fall onto his bed and sleep through the whole morning, the whole day.

"I need a boat, your honor," he said simply, so as not to rouse any suspicions.

"What's that?" Aralov looked gloomy. Then he roared with laughter, shouted loud enough to shake the house: "Did you hear that, wife? Our relative here needs a boat."

"Well, then give it to him," said the woman, emerging from the house with a sullen, sleepy face.

"So you two have been conspiring! No, I won't give my relative a boat, or a fish!" Aralov tumbled into the house, collapsed onto his bed, turned from side to side, puffing, and fell asleep.

"He'll be kinder when he's had some sleep," said Aralov's wife and went back to bed herself, leaving Kaip on the porch.

The old man strolled along the shore looking over the island and the village. It was already light. The mist that had hidden in the roofs during the night began to stir, lifted up in a thick fog, and crawled back towards the sea. It licked all the houses as it passed, the whole island, and carried off the smell of rotting fish, just like a warm rain would.

Kaip was shaking all over, and his beard began to flutter.

He heard the sea sighing wearily as it took in the mist. There were some rippling waves, and then the sea was quiet again, preparing for its new day's work. An unusually hard, busy day was expected.

Everything was silent for a moment, and then doors and windows began to bang. Water sloshed into kettles and smoke rose from stovepipes—the fishermen were awake now too. They started mending their nets, tarring their boats and pushing them out into the water. The boats leaped about restlessly they were like the fishermen, eager for the beginning of the season.

The birds woke a little later: kites, gray pheasants, and sand gulls scuffled on the beach and ran through the bushes.

Since the fish had gone down into the deeper waters it was hard for the birds to feed themselves, and so they had settled on the islands to live off the fishermen. Now they woke up after the people: once the morning catch was sorted they would take the fish that had been thrown aside as too small or inedible.

When the birds had quieted down the drone of the scout plane could be heard over the island.

The fishermen, shielding their eyes from the sun, sought out the plane in the sky. With their unerring professional intuition they sensed that today had to be the day the season would begin.

After circling twice over their heads, the plane waved its wings in greeting and flew down as if it intended to take a drink of seawater.

Now the brigade-leader came out to where the fishermen were. He called them together and started to explain something, looking sternly into the face of each one so that his words would be taken seriously, as an order.

The fishermen nodded in reply, then separated. They ran past Kaip carrying oars and jugs of water, hastening to their boats, taking their nets down from hooks.

The brigade-leader went around the village knocking on doors and windows, inquiring, explaining, threatening.

“Looks like it’s beginning,” thought Kaip. He hurried to Aralov’s house, where he found the chairman sitting at his transmitter.

“For God’s sake, don’t try to frighten me!” he shouted

to his superior. "Of course we'll have to bear the brunt of it. No, I'm not saying you've been neglecting your job, God forbid. Why don't you come check up on things personally? The sea? Calm enough. Come and visit us!"

Aralov sat for a minute with his back to Kaip, evidently thinking over his plan of action, then got up and said:

"Looks like we'll be going out today."

"But what about me, your honor?" Kaip asked. "I entreat you in the name of the ashes of your mother's cousin..."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Green Island. I can make it in half a day. Give me your most broken-down boat, I won't mind."

"Green Island? Hold it, why do you need a boat? In an hour the barge from Akchi will be passing by on its way there. You can catch a ride. All right? Go on down to the dock and wait."

"Of course, the barge! Why didn't I think of that?" Surprised at how quickly his problem had been resolved, Kaip wandered off towards the dock.

And indeed a barge with a red cross soon appeared in the waters offshore, and someone shouted into a bullhorn:

"Hey! Who needs to go to the hospital?"

Kaip, who had nearly dozed off despite the noise and bustle, gave a start and ran through the reeds towards the barge. He was afraid the sailor, heaven forbid, would think better of it and leave without him. But as it turned out he was a courteous lad: he helped Kaip climb aboard and even spread a sack out on top of the wet boxes so the old man would not catch cold lying on them.

The barge pushed off and set a course for Green Island.

Kaip settled comfortably onto the boxes. "Well, old man, good luck," he told himself. He decided not to think about anything. He would sleep for a little while. Things would work out when he got there.

Kaip had not slept for two nights, but he was feeling all right.

Suddenly he sensed that some one was staring at him and started to squirm. So he was not the only passenger on the barge.

A vague uneasiness came over him when he saw a young woman sitting at the far end of the barge. She did not take her eyes off him.

Kaip was worn out by all the people he had encountered in the past two days. Now he wanted to be alone, to approach once more his own inner god, with whom he had not had time to agree on everything.

And the young sailor kept peeping out of his cabin, making some sort of incomprehensible signs—either to him, Kaip, or the woman, there was no telling—and smacking his lips as he did so. There must have been something important on his mind. He kept leaving the wheel and the barge to fate, scrambling out among the boxes and disturbing Kaip. Then he would stand looking into the sea, not knowing what to say to the woman—a tall blonde with a cold, un-Russian face, a type hardly ever seen in these parts.

The sailor's fussing made Kaip gloomy.

And then the woman herself (she was Lithuanian, and had come to serve her internship at the hospital) began to question Kaip in a language he could not understand, made up of fractured Russian and Lithuanian.

Could he kindly tell her a few things? This was the first time she had been out on this sea, which was so unlike the sea of her homeland, and she had not had the time to find out anything in Akchi, everyone there was in such a hurry, talking about the beginning of the season, they had just put her on the barge and told her that once she got to the hospital she could get acquainted with the local ways and people. She had been so glad when he got on the barge—he seemed so wise and calm. How old was he, and what was he ill with, and what kinds of fish did they have in the sea here? She had heard there were poisonous fish too, was that true? And what about polygamy, had it been completely eradicated or not? What was the percentage of Russians in the population, and had they settled here a long time ago? And how should she, coming from Lithuania, behave so as not to offend the national feelings of the islanders? And perhaps he had heard of a certain Baldonis, a geologist, who had been working in these islands for many years? She

hoped so that he would help her, it bothered her not to know all these things...

The woman talked on and on, looking Kaip straight in the eye. He could not understand what she said, but it was pleasant to listen; she spoke politely, respectfully, as if she were singing him a song from her own, distant sea.

Kaip looked at her in bewilderment. From what she had said he gathered only that she was asking him for something, that she was having some sort of trouble.

The sailor listened too, completely perplexed. He rushed back and forth, aching to help her in some way.

“Poor thing, she’s dying of thirst,” he said, as if she were a bird. He brought water in a jug.

The woman took a single swallow and thanked him. Realizing that neither of the men on the barge could understand her, she became sad.

The sailor took the jug and went back to his cabin. The woman was even more mysterious to him now.

Everyone was silent. The motor hummed, the water splashed along the sides. Kaip was heavy-hearted: for the first time he was unable to help someone who was asking him. And it seemed to be something important.

The woman turned away from them once more, busy with her own thoughts.

The sailor did not look around at them again. The sea was tricky here, and the barge was being carried off course. The sailor understood that the sea was engaged in some vast task of its own. It was often this way before an eclipse of the sun.

Then he heard a noise: people were shouting excitedly in the distance.

Only thousands of people gathered together could make that kind of a shout.

“Could it be that the fish have come at last?” the sailor wondered as he scanned the horizon with his binoculars.

Ahead of them, in the direction the barge was moving, he saw a multitude of boats, cutters, trawlers, and other seagoing vessels.

The whole flotilla tried to form a single straight line as if to hold back the sea, but no sooner had the craft assembled than they scattered again, as if something had frightened them.

"The school!" he shouted to his passengers. "The fish are running! Oh! Ah!" And then he regretted having shouted—it was as if he had brought misfortune on them.

A cutter came up beside them, its wake foaming, and the sailor was ordered to slow down.

The barge rocked a little and then stopped.

"Where are you headed?" asked a voice from the cutter.

The sailor went pale: he recognized the voice of Ali-Baba, and although he was not subordinate to the fisheries inspector he felt frightened.

"To the hospital, Comrade Inspector. Carrying medicines, a lady doctor, and this old man."

Kaip sank down in grief, praying to God to save him from Ali-Baba's persecutions.

The cutter bumped the side of the barge and nestled up to its quiet brother. Ali-Baba rose to his full height, ready to give the sailor a good dressing-down for breaking the rules, but then noticed the young woman and relented somewhat.

"Didn't you hear the order?" He looked reprovingly at the sailor, who was standing guiltily at the side.

"We sailed early, Comrade Ali-Baba. And the doctor here was in a hurry." He looked beseechingly at the woman, hoping she would intervene.

Alas, she did not understand anything that was happening. Indeed it seemed to her that two friends had met on the sea and stopped to exchange greetings as is the custom among seafaring men.

"Who is she?" asked Ali-Baba.

"I'm taking her to her work. She doesn't know a word of our language. The old man and I can't understand anything she says," he explained eagerly.

"Pardon," said Ali-Baba to the woman in strongly accented Russian. He greeted her cordially, and the woman thought

how nice he was. He, Ali-Baba, who was going about his job, defending law and order, was begging her pardon and saying he hoped that in a few days, after the school had run, he might have the pleasure of taking her to the hospital personally, on his cutter. But for the present he must send the barge back to Akchi: their way across the sea was blocked by boats and nets. All craft not involved in the fishing were to stay clear.

The woman understood a good deal of this, and was distressed. When she began to speak rapidly in reply, Ali-Baba could only gape at her. She would not mind if the inspector took her to the hospital on his cutter. Perhaps he could explain some things to her, she had so many questions. By the way, could it be that he was acquainted with her countryman, Baldonis?

Ali-Baba's face clouded. He needed to be getting on. He waved to the woman as if to say everything would be all right, she was not to worry, and ordered the sailor:

“Push off! ”

“Aye-aye! ” called the young fellow cheerfully: things had gone comparatively easy for him.

“The old man can come with me,” said Ali-Baba casually. “He's not sick, I hope?”

“No, no. I don't know anything about him. He wanted me to take him aboard, that's all. Insisted.”

“Fine, then. I need him for some work right now.”

Ali-Baba asked no questions when Kaip got into the cutter. He pretended not to know the old man. He was in a hurry, no time for investigations now.

It seemed Kaip was not the only one the inspector had caught that day.

Four other old men, strangers to Kaip, were napping in a corner of the cutter, huddled together like brothers. None of them even glanced at the newest captive.

The cutter made a farewell circuit—the blonde woman looked at Kaip amazed—and Ali-Baba steered towards the place where the big job everyone had been waiting so long for was being done.

Already they could clearly see the boats and the people with their nets. And somewhere among those hundreds of men were Kaip's brothers, the fishermen of Sandy Island.

The sea contracted, and then relaxed. Inside the nets the water stirred and shifted after its many days of sleep. The nets billowed into heavy sails and Kaip's keen ear could hear the fish trapped in them darting about, speaking in their simple-minded language.

By the way the nets swelled and sank into the water Kaip could tell the catch would be remarkably good. It would bring merriment and plenty into the fishermen's homes.

Now they would have to work and work, to surround the enormous school and lift it out of the sea, haul their nets back to Sandy Island and from there take the catch to the fishermen's capital, Akchi, to the canneries.

IX

But in the end the old man made his way back to Green Island, his native land.

He climbed out safely onto the shore, kissed the ground in greeting, and asked its blessing. Then he went quietly into the depths of the island, to the spring.

They looked for Kaip for a long time. There was no one on Sandy Island who had not cried out on the sea when a boat was sighted in the fog: "Father Kaip! Father!"

Then little by little people began to recollect various stories in which the old man figured. Yermolai knew more about Kaip than anyone else.

"That hill there, for example," Yermolai would tell the others. "Often in a storm it would throw off a salt crust, as if it were flinging aside a garment. And Kaip wondered where the salt came from."

"He thought maybe the salt was in layers underground. He tried digging, but didn't find anything but a few pieces of baked

clay. There must have been a castle on the hill once, or maybe a whole city.

"Now Kaip knew why sheep wouldn't climb up onto the hill, no matter how you drove them: the salt of dead cities is bitter poison."

Not long ago a man came a long way to dig into that hill.

He paid the islanders to help him, and they were glad to dig. They thought he must be looking for a treasure. But instead they dug up walls and a man of stone with an ugly face, an idol. He had sat there under the sand with his arms folded across his chest, thinking. They dragged the stone man out into the sun, but he just kept thinking. Then the islanders started to laugh, but the man who had come to dig explained that there had been a temple here once, and that the man with the ugly face was a god. That made them laugh even more, because they knew that a god people had seen ceased to be a god.

Yermolai told a lot of stories about his friend. But then a fisherman who had been in the hospital on Green Island came back swearing by all that was holy he had seen Kaip, alive and well. He said the old man had been sitting in the meadow playing on a pipe and his tame snake had lifted its head, looked around at the people watching it, and done a dance. The fisherman swore too that Kaip was not alone: an old woman was sitting next to him, holding a basket for his snake.

"What old woman? What is this nonsense you're telling us?" the islanders objected. And they decided to send a barge to Green Island to check.

Today at dawn Yermolai and Kaip's son, Allabergen, set off for Green Island.

Proshka followed the barge for a long time, but finally his father drove him back.

Grieving, the boy returned to the island and sat down on the shore to wait for their safe return.



For the Honor
of
the
Emirate



Molla-Bek took the job of unloading lion cages for the traveling circus. He dragged all those gloomy prisons after him on a rope, afraid that an enraged lion would—righteous Allah, Molla would not wish such thing even for his enemies!

But once he stopped to look a lion in the eye, and was surprised.

The beast of prey, timid and ashamed, sat in a corner of his cage with his tail wrapped around his emaciated body and looked on sadly as Molla did his work.

“O, my brother,” whispered Molla pityingly. “Nature created you for terror and for courage, but you have come to resemble a domestic animal.”

Molla also whispered to the lion, conversationally:

“I can see that you’re a fake, brother. You’re nothing but an ordinary donkey, sewn into a skin of an imposing color.”

But then Molla was summoned to the director, who handed him a smallish box and said:

“Take this too. But be careful, our main breadwinners are in there! ”

Some sort of pleasant creatures could be heard whining inside the box.

Molla was not about to tease his curiosity. He sat right down and opened the box.

Two poodles leaped out and began to yap comically, falling on their rescuer.

The rescuer was bewildered. He had never come across such creatures before. Just to be safe, he said:

“Hello! Welcome to Bukhara! ”

The poodles just went on yapping, though. They had not been taught politeness.

"Oh, how terrible!" A small woman with a hoop in her hands came running up. She had on wide trousers of gaudy cloth.

"Oh, oh!" she exclaimed reprovingly, looking at Molla.

The poodles began to hop joyously around the woman, although they did not stop yapping at Molla.

"Zhanna! Solomon!" The woman made a sign, and the poodles, thrusting one another aside, crawled through the hoop. It was one of their circus tricks.

"See how clever they are?" It seemed the woman had forgiven Molla.

"Amazing!" he said, feeling a bit braver.

"Now watch this. Solomon!" One of the dogs began to spin round in the hoop, going so fast that Molla was forced to say once more:

"Amazing! I've never seen such dogs before."

And he found himself admiring her, thinking how small and frail she was: she could easily have fit into the hoop herself, spinning round and round in her bright trousers.

She gathered the dogs up in her arms and carried them off to her wagon.

Then Molla was summoned to the director once more.

"Good for you! So you've moved all of our wild animals, and are none the worse for it. Now I have something more interesting to offer you."

"What is it?" Molla-Bek was pleased: he was already getting used to the circus.

"Didn't you use to wrestle? Come on, admit it." As if to make certain, the director smacked Molla on his powerful shoulder. "You were a champion, weren't you?"

"Well, yes." Molla unwillingly recalled the distant days of his youth.

"At the palace of your Bukharan emir," the director reminded him. "You were the champion on the mat there."

"Who told you?" Molla inquired suspiciously.

"That's not important," the director said hastily. "So. How would you like to appear in our arena while we're on tour here, as an attraction for the local people?"

"Who would I be wrestling? I've forgotten it all, you know. That was a long time ago."

"Don't worry. Mariotti is his name, just a vagabond, a runaway. We pay well," promised the director. "Your name will be in big letters on the posters, and we'll paste them up all over the city."

"I'll think about it," Molla felt a disquiet beginning in his spirit.

"You think about it, my friend. We'll be getting those posters ready: 'Now, in our arena, Molla-Bek, champion of the emirate!'"

Molla-Bek went off to wander around the circus and think over his new job.

He had a bull's character. You could tease him once, twice—nothing would happen. But the third time he would charge, furiously, pitilessly.

Now he spent a long time struggling with fear of something. He even made to leave several times, to get away from the circus forever. But those posters with his name—in every alleyway, beside every house. People thought Molla-Bek was nothing but an idler, a failure. And suddenly there it would be, for all to see: "Now, in our arena Molla-Bek champion of the emirate! "

Not far from where he was standing lost in thought a horse neighed. Then there was noise, and the voices of the circus people.

"Say, champ!" The director called to Molla from the phaeton where he sat with other members of the circus. "Let's go—you can show us the local bazaar!"

Molla-Bek hurried towards the carriage, breathing hard, and climbed in. From that minute he was part of the circus.

The circus people in their flashy clothes outshone the whole bazaar of the eastern city. They shouted louder than the merchants, and threw themselves on the counters holding melons and almonds. They took fruit for samples and ate, but purchased nothing. The hospitable merchants sighed patiently as

they watched the whole band eating its fill for nothing, seizing everything that came to hand. Only Molla-Bek received their condemnation, as the host of such greedy guests.

Out of politeness Molla-Bek bought food from all of the merchants and solemnly presented it to the small, frail woman.

“Merci,” she said, taking the apple, the largest and juiciest, which the gallant Molla-Bek had selected for her.

And she kept repeating that incomprehensible word, “Merci,” as she received one present after another -a bunch of grapes, a melon.

A man with a pensive face followed her, not falling behind by a single step. From time to time Molla-Bek’s new friend would share some especially tasty morsel with him.

“Yakov,” she would say tenderly. “Try these grapes. See how beautiful they are?”

And Yakov would try them, chewing quietly, savoring.

Molla-Bek ignored this. He felt magnanimous in the company of the small woman.

But once, when Yakov turned to her and said in the voice of a child who has been naughty, “Rikka, I swallowed a pomegranate seed by accident will it be all right?” Molla-Bek answered:

“Certainly! No harm in that!” And he was proud of knowing more than the man she was sharing her presents with.

A fine evening had been granted to Molla-Bek. He strolled with his small, mysterious Rikka and listened to the people reading the posters, laughing and exclaiming:

“That’s our Molla, with the pock-marked face! Who would have thought he was a champion? We ought to go and have a look.”

They did not see Molla. He walked in the shade of the alley, wanting to remain unobserved. Otherwise they might have started shouting:

“Look, here’s the man himself, Molla! With a lady, ha-ha! Well of course he’s famous now!” And they would tug at his arm and hop around him making various repulsive faces. They might even go so far as to offend Rikka in some way -yank at her trousers, for instance.

People reading posters elsewhere did not know him. And they concluded gloomily:

“Who is this Molla? Some impostor who has taken it on himself to defend the honor of our city. Nothing good will come of it.”

He wanted to shout at these ignoramuses:

“What, you don’t know Molla, the champion? How can you justify your life in this world, you donkeys? But it’s all right. I’ll show you who Molla the champion is! ”

Little Rikka walked arm in arm with the champion, shyly cracking the nuts that she pulled one by one from his pocket.

Molla was surprised and worried by her indifference to the glory of her admirer. It seemed she had no idea who it was that everyone was talking about.

When they found themselves on a deserted street, Molla stopped with his lady in front of a poster and spent a long time reading about himself, snuffling loudly. He was waiting for Rikka to mention, at last, what the whole city was buzzing about tonight.

But Rikka went on silently cracking open nuts. She could not understand why they had stopped by the poster.

Molla’s face went glum, and he put his hand into his pocket, wanting to grab all the nuts and throw them to the devil. But he restrained himself. He coughed and began hesitantly:

“All this writing about Molla. The champion, and so on. Do you circus people always make so much of everything?”

“Well, what about it?”

“What about it? I’m Molla, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” said Rikka, taking another nut.

“You do?” beamed Molla. “How did you find out?” And right away he remembered: “Oh, of course, I told you my name.”

As they walked away from the poster, Molla said sullenly, so as not to let the conversation lapse:

“I’m going to wrestle. After thirty long years—back on the mat. Yes, it’s true. What do you say?”

“You’re not afraid?” asked Rikka.

“Of what? The director said there was nothing to worry

about. People are expecting me to win again. They think I'm just an idler, but they will see Molla the champion! Like I was many years ago, young and handsome. Don't think I'm like what you see—the trembling hands, the sagging cheeks, the flabby belly. No, that's not me at all! The spirit inside me is strong. I've guarded it, that spirit, for all these years, lying in a dark place in the teahouse. I've kept it sealed up, like in a jug, to avoid wasting it on fuss and trifles. It's here inside me, waiting!" And Molla slapped himself on the belly.

In reply Rikka laughed gaily. She was thinking how silly and touching he was, with his self-justifying speech.

"You laugh," sulked Molla. "But it's the truth."

"You're a bison," Rikka said tenderly, stroking his huge hand.

"Yes," he said triumphantly, overcome with noble feelings. "Once I'm champion again I'll marry you. It's high time you marry and start a family. And then let them say, 'Molla has gone out of his mind.' "

"Yes, let them," Rikka agreed.

"Is that you, champion?" they shouted to Molla that morning on every street. "Put up a good fight. We'll be watching to see if you're a loyal defender of your city or just a piece of filth."

"Come and see," Molla smiled to all of them, and waved. He was polite and seemed completely confident. Clean shaven, dressed in his best clothes they had not seen him like this for a long time.

"Why are you going on foot, Molla-Bek? The champion ought to ride in a carriage," they shouted on those same streets.

"What do I need with a carriage?" the champion answered seriously. "I have strong legs."

Outside the circus he was beset by a crowd of those who had been turned away.

"Molla, dear! There are no tickets, and we've come to cheer you on. Get us in, please!"

Molla was taken aback, but he said to the manager:

"Let these people in. They're my relations."

"Where are they going to stand on our heads?" the man-

ager shouted at the champion. "Don't try to run things here! "

"I'll speak to the director," Molla promised his followers, and entered through the back way.

The director was looking over the audience and reckoning up the probable take. He returned to his office delighted.

"Ah, the champ! You're looking well. In shape?"

"Yes, I'm in shape," Molla answered shyly.

"Good!" The director laughed nervously and looked around, but found nowhere to sit down. He laughed into Molla's distraught face, patted him on the shoulders and the belly, and thrust a fat cigar into his mouth: "Here, have a smoke. Ha-ha! "

Molla was nearly sick, but he held back and began to chew the cigar, swallowing it little by little.

"There are people waiting outside, friends and relations of mine," Molla remembered to say. "They don't have tickets."

"We'll take care of that too!" said the director confidently. He summoned the manager: "Keep selling tickets until there's not a square inch of free space. Pack the place up with people—the show is for them! "

"We could reduce the size of the ring and put more people," suggested the efficient manager.

"That's right! Go ahead."

At that moment Rikka came into the office with Yakov, the one who had swallowed a pomegranate seed at the bazaar.

"Hello, my friend," said Yakov in a frightened voice, and sighed heavily.

Molla jumped to his feet and fastened his gaze on Rikka, not even trying to conceal his affection from the others.

The bookkeeper came in with his abacus. He settled on a box in the corner and set about his most important task, reckoning up considerable sums and writing them down on paper.

"The champion will get ten percent—all right, make it fifteen," said the director with a wave of his hand.

The bookkeeper bent over his work again.

"Two hundred and twenty-five," he said assuredly. "Shall I pay him now or later?"

"However he wants."

The director went over to Molla and offered him another cigar.

"Molla," he said kindly, "we're paying twenty-five of those roubles of yours—tangas—for every show."

"That's right." Molla could not think what to do with the second cigar.

"So if you win the match you get twenty-five. But winning is harder than losing, right?"

"Yes, that's right." Molla was beginning to feel confused.

"Well, so. We want you to lose. For throwing the match you'll get two hundred and twenty-five tangas—a small fortune!"

Molla's bumbling mind could not grasp this simple proposition at once.

"Yakov is no match for you." the director pointed at Mariotti, who was wracked with apprehension. "If you win you'll spoil the whole show right away, and our tour in your country lasts another two weeks. Get it right now, champ! Smoke that cigar, don't mash it! Go on out there and win the big money!"

"Two hundred and twenty-five," whispered Molla, looking helplessly at Rikka.

She winked merrily at him: Do you know how many nuts and eastern delicacies that will buy, bison? I'll be cracking them all evening long, walking with you in the shady alleys. The hell with fame and all those posters—we just won't stop to look at them.

"Then I can get married," announced Molla, his doubts at an end. He walked straight up to Rikka to kiss her hand.

For a minute everyone was silent, stunned. The director was the first to laugh, then Yakov chuckled weakly too, as if through tears.

Molla was eager to get on with it now. He grabbed Yakov by the arm and flung him out into the corridor.

"On your guard, my friend!"

He gave Yakov a moment to gather his wits and strength.

Then he squeezed the puny fellow in an embrace and threw him onto the floor. He even put his foot on the chest of his groaning opponent, as if to show everyone how he could really fight, so they would not think he had sold himself out of cowardice.

A minute later, Molla stood with the eyes of a thousand of people on him and pretended to be powerless.

He did not hear the shouts or the sighs—it was quiet inside him.

He did not feel the sweaty grip of his opponent. Yakov circled round and round him, not knowing how to seize hold of his powerful body.

The crowd was puzzled. What had happened to Molla, whom the whole city had been idolizing since morning? They had greeted his appearance with a shout of joy, encouraged him, called to him, begged him to give them a real show.

“Grab my leg, you rabbit,” Molla whispered.

Yakov was already exhausted. It was too much for him.

He whimpered like a dog, clearly embarrassed about something.

“Don’t be so timid, you fool,” scolded Molla, meanwhile performing various complicated moves to create the impression of an honest struggle.

“Excuse me,” Yakov apologized for his weakness. “I have chest pains.”

The spectators decided Molla was using a stratagem to prolong the fun, wanting to make a mockery of his helpless opponent.

Suddenly someone up in the gallery began to laugh at the absurd situation, and then everyone was laughing.

“Now’s the time,” Molla said.

He felt sorry for Yakov, who had to earn his daily bread with such hard labor.

“Collect your strength just a little, and I’ll fall.”

In reply Yakov too began to laugh feebly, and coughed. Molla gasped at such impudence and covered Yakov’s mouth with his palm. That was a mistake. Molla bent double with the sharp pain in his hand, and Yakov was able to shove him onto the mat. It was over.

Molla lay on his back. He did not hear the whistles and the catcalls, did not notice when people began to throw things at him. The only thing Molla wanted to do was cry.

“Ah, Yakov,” he said to the opponent who had straddled his body. “Don’t you even know it’s not fair to bite?”

That evening Molla appeared in the teahouse in new trousers and heavy half-boots. His hand was in his pocket, where a tidy sum rested.

He poked the owner in the ribs. "Spread out the rug, and make it quick. I'm going to have pilaff."

The man was so surprised that all he could was stare, mouth open.

Molla went into the far corner and climbed up onto a wooden platform. There was another customer on it, a harmless fellow, and Molla said to him:

"Are you waiting to get some of my pilaff? Clear out of here this instant!"

Just two days before the other man had bought tea for Molla, but he did not mention it now. He went away.

Molla removed his new boots and put them where everyone could see. He settled down comfortably, legs crossed under him, to wait for his pilaff.

The teahouse was divided into three rooms. The farthest, where Molla sat in state, was for the elite. The customers here ate pilaff and shish kebab and listened to the calls of quails whose cages hung on the walls beside baskets full of pears and apricots.

The middle room, which was more modest, was for those who only ate pilaff once a week, but ate well and plenty. And in the third room, the largest, the customers washed dry flat-cakes down with their tea. It was there that Molla had passed the greater part of his days, listening to the unhurried stories of the loaders and wagoners.

Molla had not envied the men who were eating pilaff. He had driven vanity deep inside himself. But he was certain that some day a different Molla would appear at the gate of the teahouse and go on in to occupy a place of honor in the room where the rich men sat.

"Hey, Uktam!" he called to the owner. "Tell those loafers in the big room not to smoke so much. I'm suffocating. And have the cook come quick."

The owner turned slowly and silently to go.

"Are you displeased for some reason?" Molla had not liked

the man's leisurely manner. "Tell me, don't be afraid. I'm kind. I could buy you and your whole teahouse!"

He said that loud on purpose, so that all three rooms could hear him, and the loaders and wagoners with whom he had gnawed flatbread bought on credit from the owner.

"No, why should I be? I'm going to do as you said."

"Yes, that's the way," thought Molla, and stretched out blissfully to wait for the cook.

The cook would bring a kettle of fat pilaff with various spices and garlic. Molla would look at it for a long time, relishing the sight, before he took the first grain of a thousand on the tip of his finger. He would open his mouth a thousand times without tiring, would chew and swallow, stretching out his enjoyment of satiety and easy living.

"Uktam!" he shouted again, but the owner did not appear.

"Oh, the wretched donkeys!" Molla railed to himself. "When I was a poor man, chewing on flatcakes, the owner would come the first time I called. Now, when I have two hundred and twenty-five tangas, everybody has gone deaf. It's all backwards." The folly of humanity made Molla gloomy.

At this time the men who were Molla's friends yesterday, the loaders and the wagoners of every description, would be drinking their tea in the big room, eating flatcakes, talking over their simple affairs, and laughing.

Molla took all of his money out and stealthfully divided it. Then he hid it away in his various pockets, in his belt, in the toe of his boot, and in the cuffs of his trousers.

Quietly, so that no one would notice him, he made his way into the familiar big room and sat down by the wall.

The owner immediately placed before him a tray holding a teapot and the traditional flatcake.

"Look here," said one of the loaders. "It's Molla!"

"He's drinking tea," observed another.

And they went on with their conversation, which had to do with the price of camels in the nearby Kazakh villages. Molla listened but did not join in, although he would like to very much. He simply knew nothing about camels. They had taken up this theme in the teahouse while Molla was working for the

circus, and so he had missed the basic information.

"Uktam!" he shouted, wanting to test the owner. And he was happy when the man answered immediately to his summons:

"What can I do for you?"

"That's all right, brother." Molla patted his shoulder good-naturedly. "I was just testing your ear."

Now his friends were talking about the different breeds of camels. Everyone praised the rare white animals.

"A camel like that costs more than a thousand!" one of the loaders maintained.

"Put five hundred in my hand and by this evening I'll bring you a white camel," answered another.

Molla wanted to shout:

"I'll give two hundred and twenty-five for a white camel!" But he caught himself in time: it would be stupid to say such a thing. They would laugh at him.

Molla only shook his head in regret that he had been left out of the conversation, had fallen behind the times while he was in the circus. Now there was nothing for him to talk about in the teahouse: he was a stranger to all of them.

He went out, grieving, to think all this over carefully.

Molla looked around the dark street furtively, then grabbed the poster and tore it down.

"So there!" he said to confirm his action. Rikka took him under the arm again and they went on.

As he walked Molla thought endlessly, gloomily, and his thinking made his face a gray-green color. And now he had come down with a cold, in the middle of summer. There was only one thing he wanted—to walk on and on through the streets he had known since childhood. In them he sought his salvation. But there was something frightening in the streets where he had not been for a long time.

Rikka's hand was cold and limp, as if she had been laundering clothes all her life. And there was no more mystery or beauty in her.

Molla noticed that she was wasting away from some sickness

inside her, and was shabbily dressed. The charm that had warmed Molla had vanished into the thick gray sky.

He led her under a big mulberry tree and started to kiss her fiercely.

Rikka did not resist, but she remained indifferent.

“Pardon me,” said Molla. “I just went right out of my mind.”

Then he decided to tell her what was worrying him so:

“The circus will be leaving soon. There will be plenty of fools like me in other cities. But I still have to live with the people here for a long time. Yesterday in the teahouse they were talking about camels, and I couldn’t say anything.” Molla sighed.

“It will be all right,” said Rikka suddenly. “I’ll help you.”

“Please,” begged Molla. “There’s no one else I can turn to.”

“Yakov is my husband,” she said casually. “I’ll ask him to wrestle with you again, but this time in the teahouse, so you can prove yourself to your friends.”

For a long time Molla was silent, struggling with his cold and his vanity.

“Yes,” he said. “I could feel that when I saw you sharing pomegranates with him at the bazaar. But will he agree to be disgraced in public?”

He agreed. Although as they approached the teahouse he warned Molla:

“Please don’t try too hard, friend. Not like that day at the circus, in the hallway. I really do have chest pains.”

“Don’t worry,” Molla assured him. “Just one fall, so the people at the teahouse will be satisfied.”

They were silent the rest of the way. Both of them felt awkward somehow.

Molla’s spirits soared when he saw there were as many people at the teahouse as had been at the circus.

“See here, you drifters and idlers!” Molla called out, pointing at the abashed Yakov. “Look who I’ve brought!”

They recognized Yakov right away.

“It’s the man who beat you,” they answered, and went back to their talk.

“No, don’t turn away, don’t put on airs!” Molla was getting nervous. “That day in the circus didn’t count, it was a trick.

Wait till you see how I handle him now. You'll all say, 'Yes, Molla is the real champion!' Uktam, spread out the mat here in the square."

"Well then, let's see." The spectators grew interested, and settled down into comfortable places.

Molla, forgetting about Yakov's request, pushed him rudely towards the crowd, taking a malicious delight in it.

Yakov mumbled something pitifully, but he knew there would be no mercy for him this time.

The loaders rushed about, cleaning the square, spreading the mats. The crowd was already humming, demanding entertainment.

"I'll take him around to all the teahouses in the city, and win ten, a hundred, victories for that one stupid defeat," promised Molla.

"Almighty savior," whispered Yakov, seeing the mad glint in the spectators' eyes.

"Begin!" they shouted to Molla.

Unable to wait any longer, he shoved Yakov into the square.

"Begin," they shouted again, banging on something metal.

"I'm beginning!" Molla looked boldly and merrily back at the crowd. "Watch, now!" And he reached out to grab Yakov.

His opponent blinked his sad eyes, sighed, and headed into Molla's embrace the way a hare goes towards the open throat of a boa constrictor.

But as Yakov was coming towards him, Molla suddenly lost hold of himself. It was as if the blood had drained from his body. Yakov's grateful eyes as he sat atop Molla, the smell of the damp floor, the smell of money and Kikka's lips. And many other bitter and painful things that would last a lifetime, the lifetime of a man who had sold himself.

Molla, not even feeling Yakov's arms, collapsed from a slight push. He lay calm and pale on the mat, knowing that now he could not help himself, that having once sold himself he had lost himself forever.



The Life Story
of
a Naughty
Boy
from
Bukhara



First Book

THE CHOIR OF BOYS

I

Now he had made the courtyard his own as well, though it had taken longer than with the room where he was born or the cradle where he grew.

He had seen the courtyard while he was still in his cradle: in the evenings they pushed back the curtains smoothly and soundlessly, as if they were afraid they might scare away the cool that descended from the treetops to the cracked flagstones, over which his brother, Amon, would already be running back and forth. Early in the morning, at the moment of his awakening, the heavy, sun-faded curtains would be closed, so that the room would not heat up. All during the summer day the sun would remain fastened on them in yellow spots where the red material had scorched and discolored. It hurt your eyes a little to look at them.

But once a month the room was flooded with light in such abundance that all the objects around lost their outlines. That was when they took down the curtains. Later the two strips of red hung in the courtyard, and he saw his brother beating and beating them to get out the dust that had settled thickly into the velvet napping. His mother and grandmother had already hung other curtains in their stead. They had yellow spots in the same places, because the sun always shone the same way from behind the high, white wall closing the courtyard off completely from the street, from behind the grape arbor with its bare right side, from behind the oleander in its tub, planted so as to screen the window, but thinned and wilted by the heat.

This brief change in the room's appearance—which delighted him with its novelty, the abundance of light and the movement of familiar figures at the window was so seldom and fleeting that he could not make its newness his own. He would fall back

into laziness and patient anticipation, which made the whole of existence seem to him monotonous, endless.

This feeling was made stronger by the drapes enclosing his cradle when he slept. When he woke up, and there was no one in the room to feel his awakening, he lay and gazed at them, and it seemed to him that the whole room had contracted, shrunk, and that the window, with its carved shutters, had come to rest right before his eyes—the drapes were made of the same red velvet as the window curtains, perhaps even from the same big piece of material, bought the day he was born. It was close and uncomfortable, stifling. The torment would continue until Mother or Grandmother carefully (what if he were still asleep!) drew back the drapes, exclaiming at his patience (he had not cried, or made the cradle rock), and began to talk to him, to feel his body and the bedclothes, while saying his name: Dushan.

He knew already that Dushan was his name. Whenever they pronounced it he knew a caress, or approval, or a scolding would follow. It was for the expression of the feelings of others, seemingly, that the name had been given. It was a thing coming from the outside, like the curtains protecting him from the sun or like the cradle where he slept, which so often oppressed him.

The instant the drapes were drawn back his glance would rush across the room to the window; satisfied, he would feel that space had expanded, that between his cradle and the right wall with its window a place had appeared where someone might walk or sit: his mother, grandmother, or father, or his brother, who as soon as the drapes were drawn back would come rushing in for a minute from the courtyard, where he knew everything and where everything was his own; he would make faces, laugh, and then run back out into the heat.

Dushan already knew the heat of the courtyard, too, even though they only carried his cradle out at evening time, when his father was pouring water onto the flagstones from a bucket. With the cuffs of his trousers rolled up high, barefoot, he splashed the water out with his palm, intent, frowning a little, as if he did not yet believe in the coming of the merciful coolness. The heavy drops, barely touching the stones, would evaporate

at once, shrouding his father from head to foot in gray steam. It looked as if he were floating a little ways off the ground—the sight always amused Dushan.

Amon would bring a full bucket to his father, take the empty one, and run back to the well, which was right there in the courtyard. He winced when the steam went up his nostrils and got into his mouth. And Dushan, seeing all this from his cradle, understood they were fighting for something important, something vital. They were like gods, on whom it depended whether the evening twilight would come, and then the night, or whether the searing day would remain forever.

Little clouds of steam floated over the oleander, gathering in the scent of the flowers and then came in through the open window and hovered above the cradle, warming his face so that the sweat beaded up. That was how he knew the strength of the heat, which was already growing weaker, moving away.

While they were watering down the courtyard Grandmother would come into the room every now and then, big, heavy, and noisy. She would look out the window, waving her fan.

“Oh, I can’t stand it any longer! The heat is choking me!” Leaves from the sandalwood fan fell onto the carpet. They had the bill of a green bird painted on them, or the petals of a lotus.

“Just look, there’s not a leaf stirring on the grape arbor. I’ll die tonight if a breeze doesn’t come up,” she would say, putting her fan back together. He waited for the picture to be complete again. Then he would admire the hut, next to which the lotus grew, and the bird drawing nectar from the flower with its long bill—every detail of the fan’s familiar landscape.

He was restless and fussy, and Grandmother often gave him the fan to play with, as a diversion. The picture on the leaves, like a frozen image, like the given shape of his amusements, of his existence, grew paler each time. Before his eyes it lost its colors and fascination. Only the smell of spices, of musk and indigo (Grandmother kept her fan in the bronze music box, beside the spices), remained undiminished, as fresh and sharp as always.

He understood already that Grandmother did not approve of Father’s work in the courtyard. Even if Father sent the evening

breeze to relieve her, and saved her from dying today, she would still not be pleased. There was something in Father she did not like, something constant, of which she had long been aware.

But Father seemed not to notice her displeasure any more, and she, seeing this, moved away from the window to free Dushan from his cradle.

"You're part of *our* family, though, all the same," Grandmother said, kissing her palm and then passing its dry surface over his forehead in a caress. "A well-bred, gentle boy. There's nothing in you of your father. He's nothing but a blemish, a failing. They say holiness is born of failings, though... Well, why are you just looking at me with those holy eyes? Comfort me."

By her face and the sound of her words he understood that she was asking for an answer. He knew the difference already between speech and song, cry and silence. And he knew that speech and silence give birth to an answer. So he said something in answer, feeling that what he said was not at all like their speech, the grownups'. But the words were his, not borrowed, and so with them he could express more than they could with the words they had learned, which made them all alike, since they all said the same things.

Now freed from the cradle, he lay resting on the wide bed where his mother slept, where she had given birth to him and they had accepted him from her into the world.

He did not feel Grandmother's arms when she picked him up: he was already accustomed to the restlessness she conveyed to him. But he felt every moment of the long and gradual ritual of liberation from the cradle.

Together with the cradle came the first and strongest constraint he knew: constraint on turning his body, on making any sort of movement, on crawling. Grandmother would hold him so that he lay on his back, straight and even, with arms and legs extended, while Mother swaddled him—a narrow strip around his legs, and a broad one around his whole belly, right up to his chest, binding his arms to his sides. And two boards, covered with the same hateful velvet, would be put to his cheeks so that his head would not roll with the swaying of the cradle. The drapes were drawn tight. For a long time he fought against the

sleep thrust upon him. The cradle would rock faster and faster, creaking on its splayed legs, and the dizziness, which at first was slight and even pleasant, became a torment, ceaseless, and then at last brought him release—sleep.

For the first few minutes he went on trying, in his sleep, to turn his body somehow. His grandmother, peeking through the drapes, would whisper to his mother:

“He’s asleep. He’s dreaming of flying.”

And in truth it seemed to him, once he had gone to sleep with the rocking, that he was flying above the most unexpected places, places he had never seen—a cliff, or a desert. In his dreams he saw these things as clearly as had his great-grandfather, the nomad. His ancestor had ridden through the desert on a camel, and this was enough to make his sensation, his experience, live on as remembered sight in the consciousness of his great-grandson, to make Dushan’s eyes, in sleep, see the history of his kin returning again and again.

It distressed him to be put into the cradle when he was already able to stand, and was making the room his own. In his infancy, his lack of practice and the weight of his body had held him on the ground for the greater part of the day, except for those minutes when his mother or father held him in their arms. He had borne the swaddling in patience somehow then. But now, when he was already trying to walk, and the walking itself was an ecstatic moment of liberation, they forced him once again to accept constraint. It seemed they were waiting for him to grow out of the cradle altogether, so that his night world, filled with strange dream visions, would be carried over to the little bed he was to sleep on afterwards.

The bed already stood beyond the door, in the dark adjoining room, which he was forbidden to look into. He saw the room only in those moments when the glass door, shrouded in black cloth, was opened quickly, and someone would go in, carrying a lamp. (For some reason the room had not been provided with electric light; this made its secret still more profound.) He knew joy in those moments. The weak light of the lamp would fall briefly onto the little bed, and he could gaze at it impatiently.

By the time he had learned to walk, timidly and uncertainly,

the room he was born in had ceased to be alluring, desired. Now his eyes held nothing but boredom when he looked up at its ceiling of carved wood, which was not even and smooth, but composed of square depressions, each with a wooden ball hanging at its center. The balls were painted different colors, but mostly red and pale blue. The same colors were repeated in the ceiling, making a complicated pattern.

It was odd, but the colors could only be seen in the semidarkness, when the curtains were drawn in the room during the day. As soon as the bright light was turned on they faded, lost their vitality. There was some mysterious stuff in them, something that was boisterous and joyful in the daytime, and soft and restful at night. You could follow the passing of time by the color of the ceiling as easily as by a clock.

And time passed, slipped by, almost without touching him with its substance. It simply picked up his new experiences and imprinted them upon itself: his sleep and waking, food, play, crying, and again sleep. At the moment he had appeared in the world it had begun to slip away, his time. One day, having shown him its whole length, and then its tail, it would be gone forever.

But now it seemed to him that time had stopped forever in the room he was getting to know. The immobility of the things it held: the black, rotund stove in the corner, which had only just been converted to gas; all winter the little tongue of flame, peeking out of the bent tube as from a horn, had been his amusement. His mother's white bed, which began to squeak as soon as she lay down after the day's troubles ("Thank God, another day has passed. Now if only he doesn't wake up, doesn't cry for me to take him."). His cradle, which always returned to the same place, even if they carried it outside; once again it stood on the felt strips spread beneath it so that it would not skid over the hard floor or jolt when they rocked it. The massive cabinet by the door, which appeared to have grown into the wall. Its varnished doors were blackened with time, and creaked harshly when they were opened. But four gray antelope horns—the antelope was the protector of their clan—bedecked the cabinet's corners. They were hung with his father's hat, a

towel or balloon swaying ever so slightly in an invisible draft, and a bunch of dried immortelle. This was the universe which he learned to know at the beginning and which created for him, with its changelessness and immobility, the sensation of time frozen forever.

The only thing in the room that still interested him—on account of its inaccessibility and mystery—was the music box. It too had its invariable place, under his mother's bed. The box was opened very infrequently, with five or six turnings of a big key. On the first turn a melody began, at first barely audible, then gathering strength. But on the last turn the music suddenly died away and at that moment, with a special click, the silver-ornamented lid lifted by itself. Even then, the whole of the box's inside was not revealed to him; yet another lid covered part of it.

The part of it he could see held all sorts of things jumbled together: Grandmother's spare glasses, a spice-box, paper, and candies. There was paper and candy on the table, too, not hidden. He was allowed to touch them. But the ones in the box, which were forbidden, drew him, troubled his imagination. He wanted to learn about what the box contained as quickly as possible. It was the last forbidden thing in the room. Then he would be free, having laid open this closed space, to reach out into the darkness of the room adjoining his own, or into the courtyard. For it seemed to him that growing accustomed, learning to know, had its own sequence, set up by the grownups according to their experience, and that while anything in the present stage remained unknown, like the box, he would not be allowed to enjoy a further freedom.

But for some reason they always shooed him away from the box. Usually Grandmother was the one to open it, sometimes Mother. Amon and his father, it seemed, never took the key into their hands—the key that held for him the mystery of liberation.

He wanted to observe the way the grownups looked at these things, frozen in their places, about which they had long known everything there was to know. But they did not look at them at all. Sometimes—true—they touched them, dusted them, but

usually they passed by indifferent. It was as if the excitement with which earlier they had become acquainted with each object had long since passed, as if these things existed now for him alone, so that he might get a small taste of freedom when he was first allowed to know them better. Once he knew them, these same things became barriers on his way to knowing something else.

Now it was only the outside door and the windows that brought change into his existence. The two tall windows, beginning at the very floor, which was covered with a rug, and going right up to the ceiling with its hanging balls, looked directly onto the part of the courtyard that was watered down each evening. His brother would run back and forth over the wet flagstones, or jump through a window and into his room before Grandmother could shout to stop him. In winter they were shuttered at night to keep the room warm, and in the morning it would be impossible to open them for a long time: little mounds of snow made by the wind, trying to force its way in to where the sleepers were, held them pressed to the windows until Father thrust them aside with the wooden spade. He could hear the snow squeaking under Father's feet, and the knocking of the spade, but these sounds seemed to come from far away rather than just beyond the wall. At last the shutters swung open, and his brother, spellbound, would look out at the snow, blinking from its brightness, and beg to be let out into the courtyard.

The window and the door to the outside still presented a different picture every time. Their movement alone signalled the advent of a diversion. Members of the family came to him through the door, bringing tenderness, a caress, or a scolding. Strangers would come too—guests—and their arrival also meant some kind of change in the room's atmosphere: tea-drinkings that went on and on, whisperings, complaints about the heat, the waving of fans. For him all this held some mysterious significance, some riddle he wanted to guess as soon as possible. He did not know, then, that a well-founded prohibition, though it seemed to cry out to be violated, might sometimes be better than its removal, than a too-hasty liberation from not-knowing.

Everything, animate and inanimate, needs the insulation of some mystery, some illusion such as those which now enfolded the music box.

None of the things he had grown accustomed to, examined in minute detail—for example the stove with its gas-jet—made him afraid any more. What he feared was what he had never seen, but whose existence he inferred from the words of the grown-ups. True, the cabinet would still scare him sometimes, as it had earlier, when it creaked in the darkness because a car was traveling down their narrow street, making the ground tremble with its efforts, and the shaking was carried into his room by the walls and the courtyard. It seemed then that the cabinet, a dead and motionless thing, had come to life. It was this unknown and unimaginable secret ability to become animate that frightened him.

But he would tell himself it was only the cabinet. And as soon as he had called up the word he would feel calm again. He had seen and understood how the grownups treated it, how they banged its door. It remained silent. Even when it was covered with dust it could only stand there, old, sad, and helpless. He already knew the uses of different objects and the names they were called. And he sensed that some words calmed as soon as they were pronounced, while others frightened. Still others were entirely veiled in mystery—those words must be in fact the very identity and essence of things.

He already understood, though, that words had a different sound for the grownups. He had often heard one and the same thing or person, himself for instance, called differently by Grandmother, who spoke Tajik, and Father, when he was talking in Uzbek with his own father, who had come from the country for a visit. He knew that as soon as some things were named in Tajik they evoked fright, uneasiness—“bruise,” “hurt,” “death,”—while they might bring calm, even happiness, when given their Uzbek names. And the reverse was also true: spoken in Uzbek, “snow,” “light,” or “game” aroused anger, although in Tajik they called up delight.

His father and grandfather always whispered in his presence when they spoke in Uzbek, dragging out the words as if reluc-

tant to pronounce them at all. They were downcast somehow, depressed. But once they had concluded their conversation and remembered about him they spoke to him gently, in Tajik. They kissed him and laughed. He was certain they had talked in low voices only to avoid frightening him, and now they were translating for him their whole conversation, not concealing a single word.

There were some words, though, that were pronounced alike in both languages, and had the same meaning: "mamma," "papa," "brother," "grandmother", and his name, Dushan. All these were especially close, probably closer than any other words. But these words were few, and they were the very ones that were wrapped in mystery. Why did they have the same sound? Was it because they had only a single significance, a good one, and so could never split in two, frightening some and reassuring others? And why were there so few of them? Was it because frightening and secret things do not exist in themselves, but live only in words, which produce fright as soon as they are spoken? If you kept silent, though, did not speak them, there was nothing to be afraid of, nor had there ever been.

Perhaps that was the reason he remained mute even when others his age had started talking. Only seldom, and by request, would he pronounce those few words the two languages shared: "mamma," "papa," "brother," "grandmother," and "Dushan." He was certain that they would understand these words correctly and that Father, who often spoke Uzbek, would not be offended or frightened, but pleased.

"What shall we do with him?" Mother would ask. "We've waited long enough. We should take him to a doctor."

"But you're a doctor yourself," Grandmother would say. "You ought to understand. The child will start talking when he wants to. It's just that we always carry on so loudly in his room. And then there's the Uzbek... The poor boy is confused. Everything is all mixed up in his head. His mother tongue is Tajik, and that's the only language he should hear."

"He's alert, and lively, and he isn't ill too often," Mother would say to calm herself. And with that the conversation would end.

His father, who was also a doctor, was more patient and confident.

"I know he isn't deaf or dumb. We just have to wait. And it won't hurt him to know Uzbek, too." As he said that he looked ironically at Grandmother.

"But first *one* language. A second can come later," Grandmother would answer irritably. Then she would bend down to Dushan (by this time he was sitting on a rug in the courtyard), giving him to understand that what she was about to tell him was the thing he needed most of all to know. This was the tale, endless, verbose, and moralizing, which the wise Parrot would take up again each evening as soon as the cooling breeze came. The Parrot had once been as mute as Dushan, but because of that, or rather despite that, he had suddenly become immensely talkative. *The Tales of the Parrot* were the first fairy tales Dushan ever heard, but instead of surprising and delighting him they made him tired, and afraid: What if he too, once he had at last learned to talk, went on and on without ceasing, prattling endless nonsense like the Parrot? That was what the Parrot's moralizing seemed to him—nonsense. He could not understand a word of it. And so he became even more fearful of the time when his tongue would be free for speaking.

But one evening, when Grandmother was trying to force him to listen—it seemed to her that she spoke in a refined, cultivated manner, and that listening was educational for the boy—and he kept wanting to get up and wander around the courtyard, a neighbor woman came to ask Grandmother something, meekly addressing her as "tutamullo."* Smiling, she rose to receive the guest. While they talked Dushan wondered why the woman had called Grandmother that name, and why Grandmother was not offended, but quite the reverse. It all seemed to mean that Grandmother was that very same learned Parrot, reciting her stories. And he—he could begin to talk! He would never become a chatterbox like her.

His discovery gladdened him, removed his fear. And perhaps it compelled him to begin, at last, to speak. His first distinct words, brought forth mischievously and without prelude, were

* *Tutamullo*—a title the Tajiks of Bukhara use to a respected woman when they wish to emphasize her learning.

spoken to his grandmother:

“You are the Tuti.” *

At first Grandmother, in her joy and surprise, did not see the point. She corrected him in an abrupt, commanding tone:

“Tuta... Say ‘Tutazhon.’ ” But suddenly she understood. For a moment she was angry, but then she laughed at the childish play on words, and called for his mother, anxious to demonstrate once again that she was right. Mother came running, happy and frightened. Did she see now how confused things got when two languages were spoken in the same house? The boy had called his grandmother a parrot! But when Mother laughed and kissed him Grandmother decided to let it pass:

“All right, call me anything you like. But please don’t forget to talk,” she said good-naturedly.

That day brought another liberation for him, too: he was no longer forbidden to walk by himself around the courtyard. He had already examined the courtyard, on those infrequent occasions when after the evening cool had come they carried him out and sat him on the old iron bed that stood on the newly watered flagstones.

The bed stood there always, every moment. When the curtains were drawn back he would see it, beside the tub with the oleander. During the day it would heat up, its rusty springs creaking in the sun, and in the evening it would cool. The rain fell on it, and the snow would pile up on it before covering the rest of the courtyard—the grapevines with the warm earth piled over them, the rose bushes, and the awning from under which his brother’s swing, moving back and forth by itself, caught snowflakes before they reached the ground. The bed, it seemed, was condemned to suffer through some endless martyrdom.

Why didn’t someone cover it with an old rug against the cold? On that bed, Grandmother had told him, his grandfather had been born, had grown, had become old and died. Grandfather had liked to talk in his sleep. Or perhaps he had been sharing something with the bed, which had been witness to his

* *Tuti*—parrot.

birth, and it had only seemed to Grandmother that he was talking in his sleep.

And when in the evenings they would set him on the bed, he would listen intently, straining to make out some secret of his grandfather's. He had died before Dushan was born, and there was something important he wanted to tell his grandson, something so important he could not trust the message to Grandmother, who was mortal too, or to Mother. He had whispered it to the bed, which would stand there in the courtyard forever.

And, understanding this, Dushan held his cradle in special regard. When he was released from it, and it stood empty, he would ask that the drapes be drawn around it carefully so it would not be angry with him and give away some secret—his displeasure with Grandmother and Mother when they kept him bound for a long time, or his envy of his brother, who was allowed to run around the courtyard and climb up onto the roof. Let them all think he had mastered the lessons Grandmother tried to teach him: she wanted him to have patience, and to put aside envy, anger, and greed for food.

Beside the bed in the courtyard stood the oleander in its tub. It was always there, too, green and dusty. The bees landed on it and delved into its pink flowers. As they flew away they shook off their wings, and for a long time a rosy cloud of pollen would hang over the bed.

The bush was old—immortal, like the bed. It alone sheltered the bed with its few branches, its narrow, hard leaves that glistened day and night with moisture. The bush no longer ate or drank. It was sated. It continued to blossom from a sense of duty alone. In this it was sustained by the recollections living in brown rings inside its trunk.

Each spring, when the tub was carried out into the courtyard from the room where the flowers passed the winter, his father would trim off the dry lower branches, which had already lost their memories, and bring them to Dushan so that he could look at them and sniff them. It seemed to Dushan that the oleander must know a great deal. It heard and remembered everything. And, like his cradle, it might betray his bad thoughts to the grownups if he failed to show it signs of attention and love.

Everything that had appeared in the house before him was joined in a secret pact, ancient and inviolable. Everybody was watching him expecting him to be good. If for a little while he were bad, even in his thoughts, everything around would pass along his bad thoughts and condemn them. And so when Father brought him the cuttings from the oleander he looked out the window at the bush and pretended he was being forced to play with the branches. He was not to blame, not at all. If a pact existed between the bush and his father, and the oleander allowed itself to be trimmed, he had nothing to do with it, did not even suspect its existence. It seemed to him he would be punished if he even let them see he had guessed their secret.

As he sat on the bed in the evenings the fragrance of the blooming oleander, its scent of grief and old age, which for some reason was especially narcotic in the coolness of that hour, would make his head heavy. He felt ill, oppressed. But he bore it in silence, trying not to betray his suffering in any way.

The grownups also had some sort of pact with the courtyard. It seemed that in the heat of the day it did not permit them to come out of the house, or if it did permit them, then only for a short time, so that they could rush to the gate and into the street, or to the kitchen. Evidently the courtyard was amusing itself with something during those hours. When Grandmother came out of the living room and hurried across to where Dushan slept she always hid her eyes with her hand or her fan, so she would not see the courtyard scowling.

The courtyard was surrounded by high walls, with no windows out into the street. All day it stood filled with viscid heat, silent; only a few noises from the street could climb high enough to reach over the walls into the courtyard and resound there in the sun.

Apparently the only beings the courtyard allowed to move about the garden in the daytime, and look in at the windows, were two sparrows. One was completely black, and very lazy. It almost never hopped like the other one, which had a yellow spot on its side. There was a slinky cat too, always gloomy and furtive, with a notched right ear. No one else dared enter the courtyard during the day. No one else would dream of it. As

soon as some crow from the street, exhausted from the hot day, tried to land on the roof, the oleander—it seemed to Dushan—would begin to murmur in displeasure, relaying the news to the courtyard, which would rouse itself from its doze and blow a wind on the crow that lifted its feathers and bore it away.

In the evening, when everything was carried out into the open air—the rug, the blankets, the teapot, and the low table—a different pact seemed to come into effect. Now the courtyard was tactful, open-hearted, and solicitous. It permitted the family to take their ease in its bosom until far into the night. His father and brother were allowed to remain until dawn: they slept outside. At that hour everyone would praise the courtyard, lighted from four sides by lanterns, it held silent, delighted and abashed.

“How wonderful it is in the courtyard,” Grandmother would say; she was the most skilful flatterer. “If I weren’t afraid of the lizards I’d sleep out here in the cool.”

A yellow lizard with black specks all over its body and a white stripe along its back came crawling out of a crack in the wall in the evenings. It would creep into the lantern light and freeze, gazing at the dense, shaggy knot of midges that swirled there, never dissolving.

The sparrows had hidden themselves, and the courtyard now permitted the lizard to hunt within its walls. But the cat, the same one as in the daytime, would often return in the evening to sniff at the jug of oil in the kitchen, touch the picked bones in the garbage pail (after which it would daintily shake off its paws), and stare at the boy with its two red eyes, keeping its entire body concealed in darkness. As soon as the cat appeared Father would jump up, waving his arms, and drive it away. Then he would sit back down on the rug and look around the courtyard, as if he wanted to see whether it were satisfied with him, its ever-watchful guardian, and whether it would permit him to spend the night within itself, snatching up his pillow and blanket at dawn and running into the house to sleep a little longer—he did not want the courtyard to think he was abusing its hospitality.

There really must be some sort of pact between the grownups

and the courtyard: if Father were to sleep there until the first rays of the sun came, his face would be puffy afterwards and he was like a stranger, sick and silent.

"That's because he's been licked by the calf," Grandmother explained. He already knew about the calf: that was what they called the brown-backed beetle, with a flat horn like a tongue, which strolled around the courtyard in the mornings.

Yes of course: the courtyard had punished Father, had thrown the calf into his bedding because he had overslept, broken the pact.

He felt he was a stranger in the courtyard, a defenseless stranger. All the others had somehow managed to come to terms with it, to make their peace with it. But it did not like him. He did not know how to establish contact with it. Wasn't that the reason that up till now they had forbidden him to walk there by himself? Hadn't his cradle been shut round with drapes, and the curtains kept drawn in his room, so that the courtyard would not be displeased with him?

That was why he was quiet and timid at first, trying not to cry or make any noise. He wanted so much to please those four walls, the upper square, covered with flagstones, where the grownups sat all evening occupied with their conversations, the two side paths leading to the lower square, which was also even and smooth, and the garden where the grapevines, twining along the top of the arbor, shaded both halves of the courtyard. He wanted the wooden staircase leading to the very highest square, from which it was so easy to get up onto the roof, to grow accustomed to him too, but he had not yet seen that part of the courtyard, and so his efforts in that direction were not too great.

He liked it when they washed him before suppertime, put him in fresh clothes and combed his hair. He felt assurance then: the courtyard would quickly accept a boy like him into its confidence. At first it seemed to be resisting his intrusion. He often tripped over the bed, or got tangled in the branches of the oleander and fell down, which was painful and made him sulky. He would feel a chill if he stayed out for too long, or catch cold, and then for several days they would not let him out of his

room. Once one of his eyes had swollen up—that was the calf again. The stuffiness and the heavy scent of the flowers tormented him. But things got better with time: it seemed the courtyard had accepted him, had forgiven him everything because of his meekness, obedience, and patience.

Now he no longer sat in solitude on the bed through the evening. He was with the rest on the rug. He ate his supper with the grownups from the low wooden table with its bowed legs. A saucer was placed in the little indentation in the middle, and after their meal the breadcrumbs were carefully swept into it, for the sparrows.

He was already trying to eat everything, without picking and choosing, to experience the taste of each new dish. It seemed that now he had been accepted into the courtyard everything was possible, permitted. Here he was bending over a plate of mutton, breathing in the smells of parsley and red pepper. Then he saw a dish of fried fish beside Grandmother, and reached out for it. Immediately he was upbraided for his greed.

“How many times have I told you! You mustn’t eat things that walk, and things that swim, and things that fly at the same meal. It’s forbidden.”

“Don’t shout at him like that,” Mother said. “I don’t think we ever explained that to him before. You mustn’t, son. Do you understand?”

“But why?”

“Because it’s a sin!” Grandmother said.

Mother looked at her reproachfully, and added her own explanation:

“You might get sick. You shouldn’t eat mutton, chicken, and fish together.”

Here was a new prohibition. And this one seemed permanent: it was a sin; you might get sick. He did not know yet that all life belonged to the earth, the water, or the air—such is the circle of life—and that what was forbidden was to eat of the whole circle at once. If you eat something from one part of the circle, you should not look at any other, or touch it. This was done to console, and to deceive.

In order to forget the unpleasant conversation, their irrita-

tion and shouting, they began to drink tea. The ritual of this—pouring the green tea out into the cups, waiting for the leaves to settle, tapping the porcelain—all these actions brought peace.

“Oh yes,” Father said. “Someone came by to say that Gaib, the butcher, has died.”

“That was to be expected,” Grandmother said in a tired voice. “After all, they took an infant into the house.”

On hearing her words, everyone fell silent, as if seeing their rightness. Grandmother hung her head and whispered something soundlessly, intimately, as if she were speaking to someone closer, more real, than those sitting with her.

“Who died in our family when I was born?” asked Dushan, looking at the faces of those sitting around him, at his grandmother, father, mother, and brother. In spite of his fear, he understood that they were all here, as they had been when he was born, and he rejoiced. No one had appeared or disappeared in the family since then.

“Look how pale he is!” His mother squeezed his knee. “How can you talk about such things with children around? Now he won’t be able to sleep.”

“It was your grandfather who died,” said Father, who was ordinarily silent at mealtimes, speaking up only in the most difficult moments, to explain something or brush aside some notion, correcting the defects of female education with a word.

“Yes, your grandfather,” Grandmother said quickly. This was the first time, it seemed, that she had expressed agreement with Father, had not tried to argue with him, to draw Dushan away from him and bind him fast with her fairy tales. “And he gave you his name. He said, ‘Take my secret name. I am going away.’ What a noble man your grandfather was!”

“But how can it be that he gave me his name? His name was Mumin, and mine is Dushan.”

“Yes, that’s right, Grandpa Mumin,” Grandmother said, embarrassed because now she would have to reveal an important family secret. “But a person always has two names. He tells one to other people, and everyone thinks it is the real one. But everyone has another name, too, which mustn’t be told. That is the person’s real name. It is given to those who are very close,

just before you die—to those you love especially."

"And then the one who took the name for his own can tell it to other people?" asked Amon.

"Yes, it can be told, but the person mustn't tell it himself. Someone else has to reveal the secret of his name."

"And do I have a secret name, another name besides Amon?"

"For a long time you don't know your secret name. You only sense that the name you give to others isn't the real one. You learn your secret name later, suddenly. Often you learn it just before you die. Our neighbor on the right..." Grandmother seemed to be caught up in her own explanation. She was talking about things she never spoke of. This was her real, her secret conversation. "Our neighbor, now, the one who repainted his gates the day before yesterday—his name is Pulat,* and so everybody imagines he is strong and courageous. That is what his parents hoped, anyway, when they gave him the name. But if he looks out into the street and sees a dog run by he is sick with fear for three days. What a funny old man!" Then she fell silent, wearied by her own mirth. It was seldom now that she laughed. Old age was gathering everything she had suffered together inside her. It was crushing her with its bitterness. "It's time to clear the table. Our beggar's supper has stretched into a rich man's feast."

The grownups had already risen from the table, and were busy with preparations for sleep—supper really had gone on for a long time. Dushan's brother was lying beside him on the rug, which was so old and worn it no longer had any nap. You could hear his foot tapping the ground. What Grandmother had said was still bothering him, would not leave him in peace. He did not know whom to talk to. Not Dushan—he thought—that would just be dull. He surely had not understood any of it.

"Do you know what Mother's name is?" whispered Dushan. At once Amon moved up close to him, his hot breath in Dushan's face. They whispered together, looking one another in the eyes as if each sought comfort and courage in the calmness of the other. They sensed they were getting close to another secret.

* *Pulat*—steel.

And what it would be like, that secret, once known—terrifying or amusing—was a vexing riddle.

And in fact neither of them yet knew the names of their parents. When Father spoke to Mother, he addressed her as "Amon's mother." He never called her by her name. And Mother spoke to him the same way in turn, guarding the secret of his name. Even when she spoke to Grandmother about Father, it was always thus: "We must ask Amon's father about that," or "Let's wait until Amon's father comes back." They spoke as if they had no names at all, as if had Amon not been born they would have no way of referring to one another, would try not to address one another, fearing one of them might speak the other's name by mistake and violate the terrible secret of their whole life.

At first Dushan had not thought about this, but later he understood. It did not mean at all that they loved Amon more than him. It was just that parents usually spoke of one another by using the name of their first-born. They loved him, the younger son, with a special love.

When he heard Amon's name always present in whatever his parents said to one another, their tendernesses and their reproaches, he began to envy his brother, to dislike him. So it had been until this evening, when together they decided to uncover their parents' secret. Now he understood: Amon's name did not join his parents through their special love for their first-born, but through something else, something that seemed not joyous but sad.

Was it not that they hid their names in fear that someone not yet born, from their own house or one of the neighbors', would take them for his own? And would they then, nameless, not knowing their real, secret names, have to go away forever to the next world, where people lived whose names had been stolen or who, in the goodness of their hearts, had given their names to new-born children?

That was the conclusion the brothers reached in the courtyard, speaking in whispers, hushing whenever a grownup passed nearby. They did not understand yet why their names were said aloud so often, in everyone's hearing: they might be

stolen too; others might give them to those whom they loved. Yes, Grandmother had said that real names are kept deeply secret; these names—Amon, Dushan—were only for concealment. And the more often anyone is called by his pretended name the more securely his real name is hidden from outsiders. They would learn their real names some day, if they loved strongly and wanted to present them to people they loved before they died.

That meant everyone they knew, everyone on the street, never revealed their real names, always went by false ones. A sort of unspoken conspiracy existed among all of them—the same as the pact the grownups had with the courtyard and with the oleander bush that sheltered Grandfather's bed with its flowers.

And so he, too, must enter into the game. When everyone is engaged in a big game, and one stands to the side by himself, merely watching, it is suspicious, awkward, and unnatural. Everyone would notice, even without wanting to. They would pretend that Dushan was the only one with a false name, that all of them were using their real names. And then everyone would try to steal his secret name, which he did not yet know himself. The thought worried him, and he decided that from now on he would shout his name out, loud and clear, whenever and wherever he could, so as to deceive as many people as possible. And this is what helped him to overcome, at last, his shyness and timidity. He felt that the words themselves, light and free, begged him to use them, speak them.

"I'm Dushan! My name is Dushan!" he would call out, walking back and forth through the courtyard and listening as his name, borne by its own sound like a thing with shape and weight, spun round above the oleander, making the sparrows start and flap their wings, entering in everywhere there was the slightest hole or fissure. "I'm Dushan!" He would sneak up to Grandmother, and shout suddenly in her ear, "I'm Dushan!"

Now he was no longer shy of guests; he came to them of his own accord, to introduce himself. He was glad to see them nod. They believed him. They were fooled.

"Thank God, he's found his tongue," Grandmother said

with tears of joy in her eyes. She threw out her hands as if to show, with that eloquent gesture, how much the happy event had eased her mind. "I told you: Be patient. Finally he wanted to talk, and so he started."

"We won't be able to keep him quiet now. Do you remember how it was with Amon?" Mother said.

"Let him talk. There are so many words—he won't have time to say them all before he's an old man. And then he will be silent again."

"How many words are there? How many things?" he asked. It still seemed to him that things did not exist in themselves, that they arose when they were named. If he could find a word to name the secret hidden in the dark room adjoining his own, or in the music box, they would cease to be secrets. But how could such words be found? Grandmother said that even if he lived to be an old man he could never say all the words there were. And so many secrets would remain ungrasped. They would make him tired, and he would fall silent again, an old man.

Now in the evenings when Grandmother would take up once more the Tales of the Parrot, her beloved, moralizing tales, he would look into her face and begin to laugh.

"I'm not going to stand for that," she would say in an offended voice, and pretend she was about to get up and go away.

"I'm Dushan, and you're the Tuti," he would say to her, certain that once he had said the words they would do their magic, transform her into a parrot.

"Well, so what? That doesn't make me any different, or worse than I am," she would answer. She sensed that for a long time now she had feared her grandson's jokes, and that because of her fear she was losing her power over him.

"Now you're a parrot. You don't own the music box any more. Parrots don't have music boxes. So now I can find out its secret."

"Don't be in a hurry. You will find out what's in the music box when you get older. Isn't the music enough for you? It's really better than what's inside."

"When I'm tired of you as a parrot, I'll say, 'You're a spade.' Then I'll go and start digging the garden with you." He was sure that all beings, all objects, changed their essences when they were called different names. Everything had many guises.

"Nonsense!" Grandmother said abruptly. She did not even see that in the Tales of the Parrot themselves everything was endlessly being transfigured, being named with a different name each time.

The place where he sat now, listening to his grandmother, was the best and coziest in the courtyard. His back leaned against the wall of the big guest-room, which had not yet cooled after the heat of the day, and he was screened by the open shutter on his right. He asked Grandmother to sit on his left, and thus he sat in a sort of niche, a cave of half-darkness. Grandmother's quiet, melancholy voice, the soft blanket under his legs, the cup of cold tea from which he occasionally took a sip when his interest in the story and the warm cross-draft dried his lips, the light slanting on his hands, the carved ornaments on the shutters, which created a sense of beauty, antiquity, and peace—all of this tempted him to drowse. Not far off was the time for sleep. He would go directly from this warm refuge to his bed, climb in and shut his eyes.

There were not many such spots in the house. He discovered them for himself and treasured them. More numerous were the places where he immediately felt ill at ease, unhappy, suffocated. He could not stay for more than a minute in the big niche in the wall closing their courtyard off from the street, although his brother liked to sit silently there beside the jug, thinking. Or the place where Father liked to relax, on the bed in the lower square, under the shade of the grape arbor—he could not remain long there either. Father often sat Dushan beside him on the bed. Comfortable in his accustomed spot, he would invite his son to listen to some amusing story. But Dushan could not listen. He squirmed, thinking how he could get away without hurting Father's feelings. If only Father would come to his spot, lean with him against the warm wall and screen himself from the light behind the shutter—how happily they could have passed the time together! But evidently Father was not content

there, as he was on the bed. Grandmother had her special place too, and Mother, and Amon—each of them favored one spot above all others.

Besides these accustomed and unaccustomed places in the courtyard there were others, whose secrets he did not yet fully understand. They still retained some little mystery, like the oleander and the grapevine.

He had followed the whole cycle through already, from spring to late autumn, when Father heaped earth on the thin, green shoots and carefully wrapped the old, thick stalks that could no longer be taken down from the arbor. First came dried leaves from the vine itself, then a layer of cotton wadding. Finally the stalks were wound in strips of felt: Dushan held the end of the strip, and his brother cleaned the still-unwrapped stalk with the garden brush, removing the loose-hanging bark so that wood-lice would not infest it.

Then the vine would stand encased in ice all winter, with icicles hanging from it instead of grapes. The sparrows knocked their bills against it until they caught a chill and flew away. After a time the icicles began to get shorter, shedding drop after drop. For a week the dripping rang on the frozen ground, falling silent at times when the cold returned for a little—the icicles might even get longer again. But already Father was sharpening the spade and the garden shears, which he clacked impatiently beside his ear as if they could bring the far-off noise of springtime, the long-awaited sound at which all the icicles would fall at once from the vine, leaving it bare.

The secret of the grapevine was its magical power over everyone—an invisible power, and unnamed: that was why Dushan had not yet fathomed it. He only saw that as soon as the vine threw off its wrappings, its last-year's leaves and felt strips, everyone in the house, as if imitating it, also removed their winter clothes, which had suddenly grown heavy and smelled of food and dust. Now they put on light things, all of clean white, and quickly hid the winter clothing in a chest and locked it, eager to forget about it as soon as possible, as if it were something oppressive and unpleasant. And how out of sorts and quarrelsome everyone would be if the winter returned

for a day or two, like a tiresome guest who had forgotten something in their house! That did not happen often. They got out the winter things again and threw them carelessly over their shoulders, unbuttoned, so that the unwanted garments could be shrugged off again in an instant—it was like a quick-change trick.

How outgoing and friendly everyone was! Lightly dressed, they walked back and forth for hours under the grape arbor, taking pleasure in their rejuvenating bodies, in their free gait—hands without gloves, heads without hats, hair stirring in the sunlight.

The square under the arbor was narrow, and these solitary strolls were like a dance in honor of the vine, with which a secret pact must be concluded, as with the courtyard. Spring played the role of a judge, seeing to it that the agreement was not violated. If any subterfuge or dishonesty were noticed anywhere, in the family or the vine, spring would immediately send the cold as a punishment, destroying everything until a new agreement had been reached.

Meanwhile, the vine had shed its winter bark. The long strips came off the stalks with a gentle crackling, like a snake shedding, and lay on the flags of the courtyard, trodden underfoot. The stripped stalks, with delicate new skin covering their smooth green bodies, turned to the sun. Sighing, they sucked in juice from the roots. The juice filled the branches and oozed out at the ends. There it froze, turning into white buds with little tufts of down.

The sparrows attacked these greedily, trying to pick them. But soon they tired and contented themselves with holding the buds in their beaks for a little while, as if they were sweet and fragrant, filled with taste and aroma. They flew off, and the buds were left untouched. While those hard drops were ripening the vine did not idle: it grew tendrils, lashing the sparrows' legs. At first the tendrils were even and hung straight. Then they got thicker and began to curl in spirals. When at last the shoots were hung with bunches of grapes they straightened out once more.

There was a long wait until the grapes were ripe, and every-

body was tormented by a desire to chew on those tendrils. Each of them, in secret from the rest, would tear them off and savor the juice. It was sourish, with a strong earthy taste—delicious, the first juice of spring. Perhaps it was from that juice that everyone began to bustle a little, walking quickly, cheeks red, a gleam in their eyes, heads spinning slightly as if they were tipsy. Even Grandmother, as she sat darning something, would suddenly begin to sing love song that came into her head. As Father passed by he would smile knowingly, as if he had caught her at something: she too had been unable to resist, had been chewing in secret on the vine's shoots.

An old man often visited during those days, sticking his head through the gate and coughing, shyly tapping the door to get Grandmother's attention. She would look at herself in the mirror and straighten her kerchief before going out into the courtyard. Dushan did not know what it was they talked about, sitting on the bed: it seemed they were not talking at all. The old man, stroking his close-trimmed beard, only sighed and looked at the grapevine as if reproaching it for using its secret power to make him come calling on Grandmother. She did not seem to be angry with him in the least for his silence. She looked at him with a proud, steady gaze, as if he were not there at all, and fingered her beads, white after black. They could sit like that for a long time. Who was the old man? Was he the one who, after Grandfather's death, had wanted to take her for himself, for the many years of life still ahead, and was refused? But then Father came home from work, and the old man jumped up embarrassed, apologized, and left, chewing on a shoot he had torn from their vine.

The light, refreshing intoxication would continue until the little bunches of green grapes appeared and the vines sprouted broad, thick leaves with five points—three sharp and two (on either side of the stem) rounded. Then everything would change again. The grownups became irritable and untalkative, and the old man did not come to visit Grandmother any more, knowing that now she would drive him away. Weeks passed. They kept the curtains shut during the day and came out into the courtyard only in the evening, but even there they found no relief

from the heat and stuffiness. Everyone was morose, and now neither the oleander nor the grape arbor brought them serenity. This was a difficult time: it seemed a new pact was being concluded with the grapevine. The light clothing no longer gave them pleasure—it burdened them with its needlessness. How Amon longed for the morning! That was the time when he could run off to a brook somewhere, throw aside his clothes, and let his body rejoice in the water.

Father would walk back and forth under the arbor, inspecting the bunches of unripe grapes. He went off to his room displeased, and all the rest looked after him: if he had a happy expression it meant the bunches were already going purple and soon the juice inside them would thicken, turning the fruit black, the color of ripeness and wine.

Afterwards all the juice went out of the leaves and the shoots and into the grapes. The more quickly the fruit ripened, the sooner the leaves would turn yellow. Then the vine could prepare for its long winter sleep. It did not need the leaves any more and so it threw them off, one by one, onto the courtyard.

The first to taste the ripe grapes were the sparrows, the very ones who earlier had been fooled by the icicles and then by the hard buds and the tendrils. Now they gave expression to their resentment, hidden before. They knew that in the autumn the grapevine grew lazy, sleepy. It would not rouse itself to shoo them away.

And once again the mood of the vine was communicated to everyone in the house. No one was in a hurry to pick the grapes. Father would set up the ladder, as if unwillingly, and cut a few of the biggest bunches. These were laid on grape leaves rather than plates, and arranged in a circle, tip to tip. Everybody sat for a long while admiring the still life. It seemed they were too listless now to delight in the taste of the blue-black fruit. Grandmother would say, "Like wine..." but probably out of mere politeness, as a compliment to the vine after its long labors.

Strange: they had all longed for this moment in the spring, when they had put on their light clothing and held dances under the arbor, when they chewed the tendrils on the sly, when they fussed about, excited, humming love songs. And the old man,

who had failed once again this year to persuade Grandmother to go and live with him, had come courting all the same, just to sit in the shade of the arbor. All of them had been thinking reverently of the grapes that would appear in time. And now everyone wore pensive expressions and spoke in quiet voices. They went around in a haze, looking at each other absently, each occupied with his own thoughts.

They would talk only of how nourishing grapes were, how the juice brought health. Wine from grapes would return life to the dying—not for long, it was true, but for time enough to say the last “Forgive me.” Grandmother spoke of that more than the others, as if she were reminding them, as if she would certainly die during the next winter.

It was particularly sultry in the courtyard that summer. In the evenings everyone would look anxiously at the leaves, hoping they might tremble in a breath of air—as if the trees were expected to bring coolness to the courtyard. But the leaves continued to hang motionless, as if graven on the dense air. It seemed to Dushan he could draw purple figs on the apple tree and pomegranates on the oleander. He wanted to mix everything up, to violate the harmony of nature and mock its rationality, its scrupulousness. It had not neglected to send them this terrible summer heat, and he wanted to play it some mean trick in return. The picture could be elaborated still further: he could add a house beside the tree, with a flat roof and an airy porch on the second story. He would make that his new favorite spot—now it was dismal and uncomfortable even where he used to like best of all to sit—beside the shutters with his back against the wall. He traced the imaginary lines in the thick air, and they would hover before his eyes for a long time, vanishing only when the dust wiped them away at last.

Clouds of dust floated into the courtyard and hung solid in the air, coloring everything yellow. The courtyard, sapped of its strength, could no longer resist the invasion alone. It admitted the dust, choked in it, waiting for aid from its people, or the birds, or the stray cat—the same one—which now often betrayed its whereabouts with a sneeze. But no one could help, and the courtyard seemed angry that the secret pact of mutual

assistance had been ignored.

No one noticed, through the curtain of dust, that the grape-vine was ailing. Juice began to drip down on the lower square, where Father slept. At first he did not know what it was: he thought it had started to rain at last. But not a cloud was in the sky. Then he noticed the black, withered leaves and the brown specks that covered the bunches of grapes. The fruit was shrivelling, squeezing out the juice as if it were a poison that burned the whole vine inside, sickened it.

Spiders darted from leaf to leaf in search of a suitable place to weave their dusty ornaments. It seemed they were the only ones gladdened by the disease of the vine, as if they wanted vengeance for the vine's having driven them off, in the spring, with the waving of its tendrils.

Everyone gathered under the grapevine to show it sympathy. It dripped on them: slow, heavy drops of sticky juice. The vine was motionless, smothered in heat and dust.

"We ought to cut those shoots so they don't infect the whole front garden," said Father.

"Better have the gardener do it," Grandmother objected. "He knows best what should be done. But first the vine has to get rid of all the bad juice and stand hungry for a while. Only hunger can help it recover."

She said that with great solemnity, as if she were renewing her secret pact with the vine. It seemed to Dushan that on this day everything had suddenly been revealed to him. The secret had come into the open. He understood the whole courtyard and everything in it. It was cruel, unjust, to forbid him to climb up on the roof so the whole house could accept him.

In the evening he wandered around the courtyard, waiting for the cat to come sneaking down the ladder. He wanted it to take him up onto the roof—he would run after it before Father could begin shouting and waving his arms.

When the cat appeared, Father was washing the dust off the leaves of the oleander. The cat looked at him intently through the screen of dust. It was satisfied. It gave Dushan only a passing glance out of the corner of its eye. It was not afraid of him, certain he was not allowed to run up

onto the roof. It sniffed at the jug in the niche.

The cat's brazen look made Dushan daring.

"You! Cat!" he shouted. Before his father could stop him he was on the stairs. Gathering his courage, he began to climb. The cat retreated indolently, turning its head to measure the bravery of its pursuer.

Father said nothing, only moved away from the oleander and sat down on the bed to watch. It was a good thing no one else was around: Grandmother, out of her constant desire to contradict Father, would have stopped Dushan from going up onto the roof.

He did not yet know why this antagonism existed between Father and Grandmother. He could see, though, that everything displeased Grandmother. If Grandfather came from the country she would scowl and stay in her room. She did not like the way he spoke Tajik, with an accent, or how he whooped as he washed up in the courtyard, relishing the cold water. It made her angry when he brought a basketful of figs, arranged in neat rows on leaves from the tree where they had grown ("As if we couldn't buy figs here in the city."). And she would be angry again when he taught Dushan how to eat them, cutting the fruit in half first and rubbing the pieces together to "kill the intoxicating seeds," as he put it ("As if the boy were not being properly brought up."). This resentment against Father's relations, who seemed harmless enough, concealed the main thing from Dushan: his grandmother still did not want to accept his parents' marriage.

She saw no need for it. She did not, like Dushan's dead grandfather, believe that their ancient line was exhausted, that the seventh generation needed new blood. But it was true: Dushan's mother had been born weak and sickly, and as she grew to womanhood her delicate features took on an exquisite beauty unusual for their family, emphasizing her frailty. All this made her father uneasy.

Their house was famed in the city for its learning and refinement. It had always lived in a closed circle, jealously guarding its purity. But now it was clear that it could not go on without marrying itself with some more vital stock, a country family with the health of the land in it. Grandfather had announced

that he would not let any effete young aristocrats past their gate: the best husband for his daughter would be a man from the country, whether an Uzbek, a Tajik, or a Kazakh. Otherwise her children would be feeble-minded and infirm, not fit to live.

He had impressed this on his daughter too, but Grandmother regarded it as just another of his eccentric ideas. How could she let her daughter marry a plebeian? How could their noble family, which had produced so many wise, just judges through the generations, join itself to a family of builders, like that of Dushan's father? But Grandfather was determined. Although it was undignified, he himself, with the help of friends and acquaintances, set about looking for a good, simple man for his daughter. Such a young man had been found in the institute where the future "mother of Amon" was a student.

Grandfather had not lived long after the birth of the first child, but he was glad to see that Amon was like his father, strong and hearty, although he had a certain dreaminess and melancholy from his mother. He loved Amon tenderly and spent whole days with him, often lying down to sleep beside the cradle to ease the boy's crying with his patient voice. Amon was the first of a new line, and Grandfather no doubt died happy to think he had saved the family.

But although years had passed, Grandmother could not hide her aversion to Father and the country relations who came to visit. That was the reason for her endless carping: "Please, I've asked you before--don't bring us any more figs. No one here eats them." Or: "When will you finally learn to speak Tajik? There are children growing up in the house."

She was wrong about the figs, of course. As soon as Grandfather appeared at the gate, Amon and Dushan would rush to him. After the first salutations, kisses, and pats, they dug into the basket he had brought, throwing aside the dark-green leaves, and savored the wine-sweet juice and sunny fragrance of the fruit.

Even now there were purple figs up on the roof, where Dushan was exploring. They lay drying between the shoots of wheat, juice oozing all around them. It was as if somewhere up above, on the wall that shielded the roof from the street, a fig

tree grew wild and untended. It had waited a long time for someone to come up and collect its harvest but finally could wait no more and had begun to drop its over-ripe fruit onto the roof—the fig tree had mistaken the roof, overgrown with wheat, for a country field.

The thought amused Dushan so much that he stopped suddenly in the middle of the roof. He looked around him at this new world: three low white walls shutting the roof off from the street, and the edge of the square looking downwards into the courtyard, where Father sat watching him.

All Dushan had to do now was say “Fig tree” and the one he had imagined, which had dropped its fruit down onto the wheat, would rise up there on the wall and shade him with its branches. Better, he could draw the tree in the dusty air and admire it until twilight.

“Come down from there,” his father shouted.

But how could he get down without squashing the figs? Many of them had probably rolled off and hidden in the little clumps of wheat, which the sun had already burned yellow.

Perhaps the wheat had grown in the country beside the fig tree. That spring a rainstorm had washed away the top layer of the roof, and the room where Father slept had begun to leak. Grandfather had brought a wagon-load of wheat stalks from the country, and the two men had mixed them with clay and covered the roof with a new layer. Before it had dried, wheat shoots appeared on the square—some grains must have got into the clay along with the stalks. The stray cat Dushan had been chasing jumped around among the green shoots all spring, rolling in them and calling other cats to come up into its love-nest.

Among the stalks lay a coin—as if a reward for his agility. Dushan, happy with his find, hid it in his clothes and came down into the courtyard. He already understood that coins had a value: there was an idea in them, and a secret. Oftentimes when the old baker came around, Dushan, not knowing how many loaves Mother would take—two or four—stuck his head out the window, waiting, and saw her give coins in exchange for bread.

"Don't play with money," Grandmother warned. "Those coins have passed through the hands of thousands of people. Some of them were dirty, and had diseases." And to curb what seemed to her an unhealthy interest in money, she bought him a little bank in the shape of a turtle.

He had thought so, of course: coins, endlessly transformed, lived side by side with people, sometimes standing in a stall in the guise of a bull; other times lying under a bed curled up like a snake, there to remain until a fakir came along to charm it and carry it away; at still other times crawling up under people's clothing, in the morning still a bright bit of tinkling metal, now a beetle, a scarab, tickling the chest and sides, evoking a pleasurable lassitude. And so when he got hold of a coin and dropped it into the maw of his bank, a clay turtle with a green shell, it seemed to him he was imprisoning the whole world, animate and inanimate: a bull, a cradle, a snake, the Devil himself -his grandmother had already told him about the Devil.

He lifted the bank to his ear and listened, breathless with rapture, to the rattle of the coins. He peered down the dark gullet, hoping to catch a glimpse of some mysterious transformation. He waited in trepidation for the day when the belly of the turtle would be full and could hold no more coins. He would break it open then, and buy Grandmother a present. But that was still a long way off—not until her birthday.

This passion of his made his grandmother angry: "Our people have always held money in contempt. They were concerned with the spirit, not the mortal flesh." But all the same, whenever he had to be coaxed into doing something unpleasant, she would promise to reward him with a coin. Swallow some bitter medicine—one coin; ten times around the courtyard in tight boots, to break them in—two coins. He set these rates himself, and Grandmother agreed to them with a suspicious readiness. She would open the music box, whose brief invariable melody now hymned deals and bargaining between the two of them, and bring out the payment—tiny coins stamped with lacework as intricate as the gates and shutters of their house.

It must have been that Grandmother had some pact with the music box, and so knew that the coins would come back to

her all the same on her birthday, that the turtle was the same as the box. It could take into itself a part of the box's secret, and keep it till the day the clay bank was shattered. But she could not have known that the coins, once transferred from the box to his bank, turned immediately into a bull or a scarab, because there was more joy in living as a bull than as a cold coin.

Now whenever they offended him, and it seemed all the grownups had agreed not to take pity on him or defend him, he would run and get his bank (it lay in a corner under a cabinet, covered with a little pillow) and bring it out into the courtyard, saying he would release from it a bull that would run wild, trampling the whole front garden, or a rooster that would peck up all the grain in the kitchen. He understood that beside the grownups he needed someone who would be very close to him, who would always help him, protect him. For him that being was the turtle bank.

But his anger would pass, the turtle would be hidden away again under the cabinet, and he would move quickly through the courtyard, past the stuffy and unpleasant places, the bed and the tub, to sit in his refuge beside the open shutters, feeling lonely and abandoned. The grownups waited for him to come to them and ask forgiveness.

There were four of them (Amon was with them too), and he was alone. In its hours of quarreling, the family divided into the majority and the minority. The majority, supporting one another, did not seem to suffer at all from the break. He saw them talking as always, going about with indifferent faces, seemingly untouched by the bitterness, as if their trouble were so small and insignificant they need not even divide it among themselves—they could simply drive it away and forget it. But the portion of the bitterness that fell to him was unshared, and he was wretched and alone.

“Alone” was a word he pronounced, and the word wounded him, brought him to this refuge, turned him away from everybody. It had strength and power. Not like the number “1” - which he wrote in trying to reckon up his savings. That was an empty sound, a meaningless stroke, a bleak line. He could not remember the numbers, and disliked them. They were

unnecessary. What difference was there, really, between the number "1" and the word "one"? It seemed they meant the same thing, held the same secret meaning. He sensed, though, that the word "one" was used only of living things. When what was alive had died, the number was applied, like a label.

He was intrigued by his conjecture, and sought confirmation of it in everything he observed. A neighbor who dropped in to treat them to some apples would always tell him, "Don't be shy, take another one, so you'll have two." The baker said to Grandmother, "I'm sorry, I don't have enough change if you only want two loaves. Why not take four?" Not three loaves—four. Not one apple—two.

Two by two. Everything had to be born in pairs. No one could enjoy being alone. Presents and purchases were also made in even numbers. Only the dead and the unneeded contented itself with the number "1". The oleander put forth two branches and sank into the earth, hidden almost completely in its tub. Two turtle-doves, bills parted in thirst, would flit into the kitchen looking for water. You could count the figs drying on the roof and see they were all in pairs. To be alone was to be hurt, rejected, cut off—as he was in the hours of quarreling. He thought of his grandmother as his partner, since she was with him more than anyone else in the family.

He perceived Grandmother's hostility towards his father as resistance to an outsider, a third, who wanted to destroy the harmony of their pair, to make friends with Dushan, thrusting her aside and leaving her alone. And then she would certainly die from grief. The thought that since he had appeared in the house some one else must leave it, giving him a place and a name, and that his grandmother must be that one, had deprived him of all peace since the evening when he first learned the secret of names and their interpretation.

Often now when Grandmother read to him he would cease to listen, and his eyes would wander over her pale and bloodless face as he tried to envision how a person must look before going away. He must not miss the hour of her mortal agony. He must help her somehow to live a little longer and tell him the secret of her life, the secret he was sure no one fully knew. And

having learned it, he would carry it on with him in life, so two would live in him: himself, and the one whose secret he had heard.

It would be good if her death came in the autumn, when the grapes were ripe. The juice would give her life for a little longer. He would moisten her lips. They would begin to tremble, and she would be able to whisper her last "Forgive me." No, not to him, not "Forgive me" for the quarrels, the hurt feelings, the restrictions—that would be too simple, so simple it could not carry in itself the secret of life. "Forgive me" for something important, the main thing, perhaps for treading the dust of the streets, admiring the shoots of the grapevines, sucking the juice from figs, watching a lizard stalk a midge or the blooming of the oleander. Life had shown her all those things, eternal and unfading, and next to that eternity she herself was a chance guest come by for a short while, who had disappointed the eternal, proved incapable of its grandeur—perhaps "Forgive me" for that. Once Grandmother had spoken to him thus about the meaning of her life, and he, understanding nothing, was even more frightened, and now fear for Grandmother was with him always.

And she was his partner—two by two. Already he felt the loneliness in which her death would leave him. These childish fears, especially strong before sleep, would keep him awake for a long time. But when at last he fell asleep—not in the cradle any longer, but on the bed that had stood in the dark room, which they had given him in its stead—he would see mysterious and strange scenes, fragments from the history of his people. Out of the depths of time he was troubled by visions of the chase: cliffs, a running doe, killing. All around were sand and nomad camels, campfires. And in another dream uncouth, frightening faces, the deep, dark caves where his ancestors lived. All of this was like a recollection of something he had never seen, but that dwelt in him, given to him by those who had gone away, transmitted through them, their memory and dreaming, so that later he could pass on, together with his own experience, the whole history of his family, in this generation grown still richer in memory through the intermingling of the nomads with builders, his father's family.

These ancestral memories disturbed the others, too. Often on Sundays the family would sit down in a circle on the rug in the courtyard to share its dreams. They would gather as if by chance; his grandmother, perhaps, would sit down first and call to Amon: "Come and tell what you have dreamed." And not only Amon would answer her call: his mother and father too would come out of the rooms, leaving their occupations, as if invited to a family ritual. They wanted to have their say too, to ease their minds, and to hear what the others had to tell. And it seemed that the well-being of the family depended on the skilful commencement and conclusion of this ritual.

Dushan's father told how he had woken up several times during the night, fleeing from some onerous dream. But as soon as he went back to sleep, the story would pick up again where it had been interrupted. He saw some ancestor of his killed, and he knew beyond doubt that the murderer was a relation of his victim: that far-off secret would not have been communicated to him through someone who was not of his blood. And now, after so many years, what the killer had seen came to life once more in Father's dreams, so that he too would be witness to the deed.

"As if my conscience were expected to answer for what happened in the family before I was born," he added. No one said anything to console him: they accepted such demands from the family as a matter of course.

Grandmother's dream had been more peaceful: a girl looking for a lost sheep among the rocks. Her father was watching her from the roof of the house; for some reason he was waving a pole with a horse tail tied on the end. As she told of her dream, Grandmother even broke down and cried: she was sure the girl was her own mother, and that the scene came from the years when Grandmother herself had not yet come into the world.

"It's a strange thing," she said, "everyone lives his own life, and learns from his own mistakes. The knowledge the family has built up stands aside, like something dead and unnecessary. It only comes back in dreams, and you can't get anything of use from them. If I lived in the country, I might have lost a sheep too, like my mother did. And I would have looked for it, like

she did, although the scene from her life I saw might have taught me caution. But then every lost sheep is different."

"It would be tedious and uninteresting to live that way," Father said. "If everyone were to tread the very same path. Every person wants to see something new, something mysterious. That's what they mean by destiny."

Dushan sensed from the grownups' faces that their innocent conversation, which had begun with the telling of dreams, had not ended very pleasantly. That was why no one supported his father, and he even seemed glad of it. Everyone fell silent, and Father, without rising from his seat, reached towards the bed, under which, covered by a pillow, lay a cool melon. Now father was whistling carelessly, tossing up the melon and catching it out of the air.

Grandmother didn't like melons; they brought her a tray of peaches. The skins were red, and split. The juice, which was so aromatic that you could feel the taste long before the first bite, oozed out impatiently.

As if knowing the precise time of this feast, a guest would drop by each Sunday. Everyone would rise and invite him to take part in their breakfast of fruit.

"Peace be with you. Peace be with you," the guest would intone, bowing to everyone. And they would all bow to him too, magnanimously ignoring the comedy of it. When five bow to one, the one must feel himself at the very least a prince, but this was only a shy neighbor who had looked in on their day of rest to see if everything were well, and then to pass the good news on to the whole street. It would be improper to speak oneself of one's well-being, and that is why this man came, who was called the spy.

That name is usually given to one who observes secretly, intending evil. But although the neighbor who came worked in secret, he was not a malevolent spy, but a well-meaning one.

It would be unfitting to ask if everything in the house were well: well-being, brought forth and named, might be stolen; everything must be guarded by secrecy. It was this secret that the well-meaning spy had come to learn. Not to harm the house, but for the good, so that all could be glad.

Those whom he visited well knew the reason he had come, and the spy too sensed that his purpose had been discovered, but all the same the guest and his hosts pretended they knew nothing of each other's intentions. They pretended, and everything they did was like a subtle game.

After the initial greetings, the guest would switch into the "bird language"—that was what Grandmother called it—and uncover the secret of their well-being through his own complaints.

"I could hardly get up this morning," he would say, and tell them about his back trouble. "My age, you understand. I thought I should be unable to reach your gates." Then Grandmother would try to convince him of the opposite:

"Oh no, you look very well. Not like I do. I haven't been able to stand up all day, my head swims so."

"How can you complain, at your age?" the well-meaning spy would say. "I am only a bit under eighty. See how my hands tremble, and my cheeks sag, and my eyes have lost their sparkle—they are growing yellow and blind." And he would show his hands and his cheeks, and move closer so Grandmother could look into his eyes.

But Grandmother would dismiss all these feigned complaints immediately, speaking in turn of her own weariness and ill-health, and the spy would listen, savoring his tea, his face growing brighter and brighter from the news he was learning. Because if, on the contrary, everything were not well in their house, Grandmother's answers would necessarily be the opposite. Instead of answering his complaints with her own, she might say, for example:

"Have you tried applying snake skins to your eyes? Last spring, when I noticed my eyes were growing yellow, I put freshly shed snake skins to them each night for a month, before going to sleep, and the trouble passed. And I cured my back pains with herbs. I chopped them fine, mixed them with mustard, and made myself a plaster. Have you tried that?"

"I must try it," the spy would have answered. "Others have given me the same advice." He would understand from Grandmother's words that something in the house was not well, and

his response would be meant as a consolation: others, too, were not enjoying perfect well-being, life was hard, we must endure.

Dushan could not yet grasp all the refinements of the "bird language," but he understood the way their courtyard received the guest.

The courtyard lived in seclusion. It was accustomed to their family and had entered into a pact with them. But it had no such pact with the spy, although his intentions were good. He came only for a time, and tried in every way to make it clear to the courtyard that he was a guest only, that he would discover the secret of their well-being and leave without touching the oleander, or the pitcher in the niche, without walking long in the front garden or touching the bed, trying to move it from its place.

The guest stuck his head in at the gate and waited without moving until someone noticed him and invited him in. Grandmother would get up, and the guest would bow and then pass under the grape arbor with hurried steps, holding his palm to his cheek as if he were afraid Father's room were frowning at him, condemning him. He left the right half of his face unshielded, though, so the family could see its meekness, his shy smile.

When he had reached the upper square, and they all rose to greet him, the guest would look them in the face one by one, repeating loudly "Peace be with you," as if it were his greatest joy to recognize each one of them, to be satisfied they were all still present in this world.

"Peace be with you also," they answered him, and he would sit down on the rug. Now for the first time he looked around the courtyard without apprehension, as if wishing to see whether it had understood by his actions and words that he had come only for a time, as a guest.

To confirm the guest's assurances, and to placate the courtyard somehow themselves, giving it to understand that the spy did not mean to stay more than half an hour, they would immediately brew fresh tea, even if the guest arrived just at the moment they were sitting down to tea. The red-dotted teapot, carried out of the kitchen across the courtyard to the guest, was

a sign the family gave the courtyard to calm it.

The yellow sugar crystals on a saucer ("Sweeten your tongue") were a sign too, and part of the ritual of hospitality.

When he had sweetened his tongue with yellow sugar, the spy would begin to play his game, to find out the secret of well-being, and his hosts played along with him complaining of sleeplessness, poor appetite, and non-existent ailments. The courtyard, having admitted the stranger for a brief while, listened in silence, as if it were the most jealous guardian of the game and would be the first to punish without mercy any violation of the rules, being the giver of health and well-being, the protector of all of their family. Finally the hosts would see their guest to the gate, and the tension would slip from the face of the courtyard. Once again it would begin to concern itself with those who lived within it.

Beyond the gate to which the guest was shown began the alien world of the street. It was not part of their pact, not friendly. It did not, like the courtyard, recognize him as its own. It was impossible to enter into a pact of secret friendship with that world. It turned back every overture, accepting neither Dushan's smile nor his friendly look as he stood by the gate. The long, dusty corridor admitted everyone into itself. Sultry and arrogant, it gave itself to all, thus demonstrating that no one should expect from it sympathy or warmth. And probably for this reason no one sat relaxing in the street beside his gate. No one stood there for more than a moment. If acquaintances chanced to meet, they would exchange greetings and hurry into their courtyards. Cars, coming in by mistake, would halt halfway down it and quickly back out: the street where their house stood was a dead end, a long passage between white walls, windowless and doorless. And every five paces a gateway, the entry to a courtyard.

Their courtyard closed off one end of this corridor, which at its other end emptied into a new street, wide and noisy, where trucks passed. Their street was so narrow that when a truck cut across it at the far end you could take in all of its detail: first the nose would show itself, then, slowly, the body, and when the nose had disappeared it was still a long while

before the tail became visible; you could see the cabin with the driver in it, then the bed with hay, lambs, or logs, and finally the tail itself, and a cloud of smoke. Then the next truck would appear, as if sniffing at the tail of the first, and so on and on all day. The noise of the neighboring streets reached theirs only faintly, and it seemed that their street, so little and quiet, ought to have been shy and friendly, because there was nothing in it to spoil its character or make it develop a feeling of superiority—no crowds, no cars, no asphalt sticky in the summer heat, no streetlamps, no trees along a stream, no bright advertisements, no stone façades. Their street was without all these things. It had lived a simple life of contemplation, for a good hundred years already, letting its old clay walls slowly crumble, and held nothing worthy of remark except several aged dogs who could no longer run in the other streets. Worn out by their own curiosity, they wandered in the dead end, sniffing at its walls. The people in their street were always the same ones; a new face invariably proved to be someone who had blundered in by chance, and was looking for a way out. Amon patiently explained to the strangers that they would have to go back out, and where they should turn. Often, seeing a stranger coming in, he would shout to him: "This is a dead end!" The stranger would stop, perplexed. Then he would look at their courtyard and grumble something—it blocked his path, and now he would have to return to the noisy street and go on looking.

It seemed sometimes that their courtyard, by closing off the street, was a bother to people who chanced into the dead end. Once Grandmother, standing with Dushan at the gate, even got angry with a stranger, and raised her hands.

"You look at our gate as if it had appeared here just yesterday, overnight. Our house has stood here for three hundred years already, and will stand for as many more, peace be upon it. And so warn your children, and your grandchildren, and your great-grandchildren—may you live to see their birth—that this is a dead end, so that they will not wander into here."

"But there must be a way over to the next street."

"Yes, but only through our courtyard, and it is not a thoroughfare."

Grandmother was right: there was a little door in the courtyard, next to the kitchen, and if you opened it you could get out into a vacant lot. But the door was always kept locked. No one needed to go out into that hard, salt-covered, empty place, where there were always little tornadoes playing in the sand. This was the edge of the city, but the city was growing from its other edge, where the river was.

And if the door were open, and strangers could pass through their courtyard, would not then the pact between it and the family be broken? The protector of their family would have rebelled, weary from the multitude of strange faces, strange smells, and insincere smiles, the tread of strange feet, as people who had wandered into their street hurried through the lower square under the grape arbor, shielding their faces with their palms against the wrath of Father's windows, rushing out into the vacant lot as quickly as they could.

How many secrets those momentary guests would have carried off, only to lose them in the vacant lot, where a dust devil would suddenly appear to tear the secrets from their tongues and scatter them in emptiness! Curious, they would certainly peek into the kitchen, look at the oleander. They would see the pitcher in the niche through an open window, would glimpse the dark room that opened off Dushan's and guess at once what was so carefully hidden from him, even though he was already allowed to go out into the street alone.

Amon ran to the end of their street and back again. He returned, frightened by the roar of the traffic, and threw himself at the gate in play. He opened it and looked into the courtyard, as if it gave him courage for yet another run. Dushan would walk back and forth sometimes beside the entryway, but his longest excursion was from their gate to the neighbors'—he was afraid of their white mongrel.

The first time he had gone out into the street, the dog, seeing an unfamiliar person, had begun to bark at him, mostly out of fright. Dushan had run back into the courtyard, his face pale.

“Why are you such a coward? You probably ate some sheep's brains.” And Grandmother would begin to blame Mother:

Hadn't she been told she must watch that the boy did not eat the brain by accident? For Grandmother herself, a dish of fried sheep's brains was the greatest delicacy.

"But I haven't given him brains, not once. Do you think I don't understand?" Mother would say, defending herself. He liked his grandmother's explanation: from a sheep's brain, all of its cowardice and stupidity could get into a person.

"But you eat sheep's brains. Aren't you afraid?"

"There's no need for me to be afraid of stupidity any more."

He was not in the least satisfied with that answer. It was too much like an excuse.

And so not only words, which named one and the same thing in different ways, could change their shape; not only coins hidden in a bank, lying there transformed into a bull or a rooster. Living things too, without the intermediary of coins or words, could transfer their essence to other living things. All that you need do was feed on their brains. And what if Mother made him a dish from the brains of a rooster? Would he start to crow?

This question he put whenever he saw that the grownups were disposed to talk to him. But as soon as he began, they would jump up and accuse him of stubbornness, a love for silly fantasies. They thought of him already as completely independent, capable of sorting out for himself what was true and what false. And so he remained unsatisfied, until he glimpsed something in the street that disturbed him more than the problem of eating brains.

They no longer drove him into the bedroom in the afternoons, standing over him insistently until he went to sleep. The days had become cooler, and he understood that they had forced him to rest because of the heat. Now he was in the courtyard most of the time, and went out of the gate freely, whenever he liked.

It was on one of his sorties that he saw a man going down towards the wide street with a mountain of small loaves on his head.

"That must be the baker," he thought, although he knew the baker to whom their street belonged, and who was bound by an

agreement with the other bakers to sell his wares only in the dead end, was an old man. He liked to watch the baker come through their gate, bowing his head slightly. The loaves bowed too, as if they had grown together. And then, straightening up again, the old man would stand in their courtyard and without removing the mountain from his head reach loaves down off the top and hand them to Grandmother. Seeing that this trick delighted the boy, he would wink merrily as he did it, pleased with himself, like a juggler after a successful number, and leave Dushan to puzzle over the mystery. And mystery it truly was: How could that high mound of loaves stay on the baker's head? He always walked quickly, careless of his burden, his hands on his hips, with no tension of any kind in his face, no worry that the bread might tumble off. But surely he must be constantly alert—who would buy loaves that had fallen into the dust of the street?

Once he even tried to balance two newly purchased loaves on his head—what if he could?—but they fell off and rolled over the flagstones. Grandmother slapped his hands. She seemed more angry than he had ever seen her.

“Kiss the bread, ask its forgiveness, you bad boy!”

In his surprise he even forgot to be angry with Grandmother for her sternness. And she, seeing that he hesitated, uncertain how to kiss the bread and ask its forgiveness, brought a dusty loaf to her own lips and kissed it to show him.

“You mustn’t drop bread. Ask its forgiveness.” He kissed the loaves, although he was sure he was kissing the coins that had been given to the baker for them, which had now been transformed into this punishment for him.

His grandmother knew the lesson had taught him nothing, and asked the baker herself the next time he came to show Dushan how the loaves were kept on his head, so the boy would be satisfied and not try any more himself.

The baker looked sad, as if he were afraid that once he had showed how the trick was done Dushan would no longer greet him with such delight, holding his breath as the two top loaves were reached down: Would the pile collapse?

“Please, excuse him,” Grandmother insisted.

The baker winked one last time at Dushan: Say goodbye to my mystery. He carefully removed the whole heap and bent down his head to display a ring of cloth flattened onto his shining bald scalp. When the old man had gone, Grandmother explained that he carried the loaves on his head so they would stay as light as when they were taken from the oven, and always look tempting. That was all there was to the trick.

The baker he saw now, though, was a young man, probably the son of their baker. He too walked lightly and easily away down the street. Dushan was about to turn away and forget about him, but suddenly he heard the crows cawing. There were two crows sitting on the fence, the same ones as were often to be seen scratching in the dust of the dead end, and then shaking off their feet. Sometimes they flew into the courtyard, violating the pact it had made with the sparrows.

He was certain they had cawed to him, so that he could watch the fun: as soon as he looked at them, they swooped down from the fence onto the loaves the man was carrying on his head. Each of them snatched a loaf. They perched again for a moment on the fence, and then flew away with what they had stolen, no doubt believing they had thrilled Dushan with their deftness.

The man at the far end of the street grabbed at his toppling burden, but could not hold it in place. The loaves fell onto the sand. The man continued to stand there, distraught, clutching at his head. Dushan wanted to run and help him, but then he remembered something dreadful and shut the gate. He thought that the man whom the crows had attacked must be sitting in the sand, asking forgiveness of the bread: "Oh merciful bread, tender-hearted bread, we bow to you, we beg you to take pity..."

"Grandmother, that man will be crucified!"

"Yes," said Grandmother in a weary voice. It made her tired even to think of how he would plague her now with his fantastical questions. "Go back out and play."

He was afraid to go out again, to look at the man who would be crucified. He stayed in the courtyard. Grandmother's indifference displeased him.

Her favorite reading, next to the *Tales of the Parrot*, was a

book in a leather binding stamped with gold. It was carried out solemnly, and when the reading was over it was carried solemnly away, hidden once more in the music box to the accompaniment of its short, haunting melody. The other books (they were not many, and nearly all of them on medicine) stood on the shelf, suffering the dust and stuffiness of the room. The written pages caught greedily at every current of fresh air which made them flutter and curl. But this book, whose special quality gave it the right to lie alone in the music box, listening to the music and breathing in the odors of musk and indigo, had pages that were always fresh, so sheer that there seemed to be a layer of air between the letters on their two sides, which changed color when they were read at different times of day.

Mostly Grandmother read to him in the evenings, and the electric light turned the pages of the book a pale, lusterless blue. Was that not the reason the book's story held him enthralled? He thought about it a great deal. And now what Grandmother had read had been repeated in real life: he had seen the crows swoop down on the man in the street and take away his loaves.

He walked back and forth in the courtyard, going over the whole story to himself, from the beginning. He wanted to imagine what had happened to the man before the crows beset him, and what would come after, right up to the moment of his crucifixion. True, the man was not the main personage in the story—it was the story of Joseph and his brothers. But all the same he must remember every detail of what he had heard, so as not to miss anything in the episode with the birds.

"Grandmother, how many sons did Joseph's father have?" He could not remember that.

"Eleven!" Grandmother shouted in answer, looking out the window at him.

There were eleven sons, then, but Joseph was the fairest of them all. He was so good, and his father loved him so, that his jealous brothers decided to murder him. For a long time they could not make up their minds how to do it. Then they had an idea: they took Joseph hunting with them, and threw him down a well. They told their father he had been devoured by wolves.

Their father, in his grief, began to go blind. But Joseph was not dead. A caravan passed by the well, and the merchants heard a groan coming from it. They saved Joseph, and when they came to their own country they sold him into slavery. And the wife of the officer whom Joseph served fell in love with him.

"What was the name of the great man's wife, the one who fell in love with Joseph?"

"Zuleika."

But Joseph did not love Zuleika, and she decided to take revenge on him. She said to the great man: "Joseph tried to rob me. Put him in prison."

The officer believed her, and cast Joseph into a dungeon, where two other men were also. Once one of them woke up and said: "I dreamed that I was carrying loaves on my head, and the birds came down to eat them." The other robber said: "I dreamed I was pressing grapes. What could this mean?"

Joseph answered: "It means that you, who pressed the grapes, will serve your master wine. And you, who dreamed of birds, will be crucified, and the birds will peck your head."

Dushan went to the gate and opened it cautiously. The man who had been carrying the loaves on his head was no longer in the street. They had probably crucified him because he had been unable to keep the loaves on his head, and the bread had fallen on the ground. He had often heard Grandmother complain: "I remember the bread when I was a girl -so soft and fragrant! Nowadays it's just not the same. The flour isn't what it used to be. The bread is all looks and no taste." Then, realizing that she was abusing the bread they ate, she would redirect her anger, adding for clarity: "It's that baker, the devil."

At last Grandmother broke down, gave in to Dushan's persistence: "What will you die from?" Once as they stood at the gate she pointed to the tail of a dust devil high in the sky and answered: "From the Devil. He will come in one of those and carry me off." Later she was sorry, because now all his questions concerned only one thing—the Devil.

He already knew that the Devil, who was neither a person nor an animal, was amazingly clever and had taken from both what was most valuable for him and combined it all: the human

mind to help him in his magic-making, and the human tongue to curse, to blame, and to remove prohibitions; but his soul was that of a beast all the same, and he adopted all kinds of disguises so as not to be recognized and caught, and would frighten people, the trickster, with a goat's horns, beard, and tail, all of which he could make longer or shorter as he willed. And since he needed to defend himself, being despised and beleaguered by all, he clapped claws onto his human hands, and stuck them out from behind fences to frighten children, laughing.

Knowing this disguise of his, half-man and half-beast, people denied all kinship with him -denied it vehemently, as if they were suspected of having secret ties with him. But the beasts too repudiated him, arguing that the mind was a surer proof of kinship than the soul, and that the Devil was rather a man by virtue of his human speech than an animal by virtue of his horns and beard.

Hearing all this, the Devil would snicker. As if to settle the argument between people and beasts, he would say he belonged to all of living kind—indeed, he would be offended if one of the disputing parties claimed him as kin to the exclusion of the other. He was everywhere, moving easily and quickly from people to animals and back again, knowing all their secrets and wishes, and holding all their ties in his hands.

“Oh, the crafty devil!” Grandmother would exclaim.

Then she told Dushan something even more surprising. People need the Devil sometimes, even though he is so vile and frightening. Take, for example, the lazy, bald-headed fellow whom everyone called a fool. His father came to him once and told him someone was stealing melons from their field. He sent his lazy son to keep watch. At midnight the lazy fellow, lying among the melon hills, saw an enormous bird swoop down and try to seize a melon in its talons. But the lazy fellow grabbed the bird by its legs, and when it bore him aloft into the sky he did not let go, hoping to get the better of the thief with his stubbornness. At last the bird spoke: “Let me go, bald one, and I shall reward you with a poppy seed that will bring you happiness. The king's daughter is ill. You will cure her with your poppy seed, and you will take her as your wife, with half the kingdom as her dowry.”

The Devil had put the bird under a spell, of course. He liked to play that sort of trick, to take beasts' souls and put them into people, turning them into birds, or to give people the souls of birds. He did that to relieve his boredom, to see what would happen.

The lazy fellow accepted the poppy seed and let the bird go. He returned to his father: "You all laugh at me, call me a fool, but one day I shall be king." His father did not believe him, and shed many tears: How was he to keep his bald-headed son from falling into some misfortune? But the son was already far away, coming towards the palace. There, as the bird had said, the doctors were gathered around the sick princess. They argued among themselves, but could do nothing to make her better. The fool said, "I can cure her." He asked them all to leave. The princess swallowed the poppy seed, and the next morning she awoke cheerful and full of chatter—as if she had not lain ill for more than a year. The king had no choice but to keep his word, to marry his daughter to the lazy fellow and give him half his kingdom to rule. And after they were married the bird was turned back into a person. The Devil had promised the bird: "If there is anyone fearless enough to hold you by the legs and fly with you until you speak, and give him a poppy seed to let you go, I will give you back your own soul."

And so, if it were not for the Devil's mischief, the bald-headed lazy fellow would never have made his fortune. He would have been nothing but a fool all his life. The Devil had done a good deed by mistake.

But this quite reasonable explanation did not comfort Dushan at all. A dust devil would take away the other half of his pair, and leave him in anguish. He rolled up balls of clay to throw at the devil as soon as he drew near their gate, hoping to carry Grandmother off. Sometimes he would secretly open the little door into the vacant lot beyond the house, and watch a dust devil being born.

Dust devils were born often. The sand would start to crawl along the ground, picking up debris—leaves, bits of paper, cotton fibers—and then the Devil, creeping from a crack in the ground, still wrapped in the warm steam of the depths, would

draw up sand from all sides and lift it higher and higher in a spinning column. The dust devil's tail would still be dragging along the ground, the top of the column would fan out, and then the twister would leave the empty lot to dance in the streets.

As soon as the dust devil left the vacant lot to go hunting, Dushan would be ready at the gate, waiting for it with balls of clay in his hands. He was sure that the damp lump, striking the Devil, would fix his dark print in the sand. The Devil would take the shape of a bird and fly away, but Dushan would know he had hit him: the Devil would heave his image in the sand. He would be frightened, and not come back again to take Grandmother away.

Evidently the Devil sensed the danger. From the vacant lot he would go directly into other streets, raiding there, and for some time there were no dust devils in the dead end. But now one, the most brazen, had come in all the same. The neighbors' gate banged open in the wind. It seemed to Dushan the Devil had slunk out of that house. And already he was twisting, dancing in their street, pulling his tail out of the neighbors' gate and licking his lips after his foul deed, as if he could taste someone's soul on them.

Unsated, he peeked into other courtyards, bending his body over the walls while his tail moved on impatiently to the next house. The Devil worked constantly with his paws inside the column, covering himself with sand wherever his body might show through, pushing back the thick cloud when he wanted air—and so he moved along. Now he was heading towards their gate, whistling merrily.

Rather than coming down the middle of the street he clung to the wall. His breathing left damp strips there, as if he did not rely on vision but sniffed at souls, distinguishing them by smell. Then suddenly he pulled in his tail and flew away, before Dushan could throw a clay ball.

“Devil,” whispered Dushan. He was sure his enemy had guessed his intention and decided to hide for a while, biding his time, to come flying in later unexpected, catching Grandmother unawares.

Dushan ran to the gate from which it seemed to him the

Devil had emerged after taking a soul. He stood for a while straining to hear weeping and moaning. The gate had already been closed, and Dushan did not dare shove it back and look inside. Suddenly the gate opened. A woman came out. Recognizing Dushan, she smiled to him in surprise, and said something, passing her hand lightly over his hair. But he stood silent, with his head down, and then went home and counted again the clay balls he had made.

When the balls got hard and started to crack, he carried them outside the gate and rolled them down the street. The other boys watched. The game pleased everybody, and soon their dead end was littered with clay balls. But then a sudden rain wet them, and when the boys woke in the morning there were little piles of clay under foot instead of balls.

In the evenings a choir of boys sang in their street. It was September, the month of Ramadan. All that long month he would listen as the choir—at first shyly, as if the boys were trying their voices, then louder and louder—went from threshold to threshold, getting closer and closer to their gate. He would climb up onto the roof so he could make out the words to their song, and sit there hiding until after the singers had looked into their courtyard.

*We come to your gates, our song a simple one,
Reminding you the time of fast has come.
For thirty evenings we will visit you,
Eat your meal, and we will sing to you...*

They insisted on being listened to for thirty days, and every day the same song. In exchange they demanded attention and gratitude, because the choir returned many to their childhood, to their own choir, that eternal choir of boys which they had left already, giving over to their children and grandchildren. But the boys were heard out in patience for only two or three evenings. After that the words, from frequent repetition, ceased to produce any effect. Grandmother rushed towards them with a handful of figs.

“Enough now, enough,” she would say, breaking off their

singing. They would each take a fig and go away. A minute later, ranked before the neighbors' gate, they would begin again. And now Amon's voice could be heard among them: while Grandmother was thanking the boys, and they were bowing in answer, he had managed to slip out of the gate unnoticed.

Dushan would listen to his brother singing, and then come down from the roof. He felt embarrassment at not being allowed to sing in the choir. But this September he knew the story of Joseph the Fair, and there was no sense in forbidding him. Hearing the choir sing about Joseph, he felt his kinship with the boys. He understood that he was one of them, although they came from different courtyards, closed off from one another by walls, and their experience was not like his—for surely each of them was bound by different rules in his pact with his own courtyard, and what one courtyard might accept another would reject. But whatever divided him from the other boys, the choir called to him, lured him, invited him into its fellowship for the long years of brotherhood to come. True, when Grandmother gave him permission to sing, Mother and Father had looked at her reproachfully: "The children of doctors singing on fast days..."

"What fast?" she scoffed. "Those times are gone. It's only a children's game."

She was right. In all their street there was probably not even one person who on fast days denied himself his usual food, taking a single meal after sunset, although Grandmother said that fasting did you good, cleaned out the system and restored youth, and that these days even doctors often prescribed a starvation diet.

The ritual of old had not remained, but the month of September returned every year to assemble the choir of boys, and the custom of dining after sunset—the time for singing—had been kept, and the song itself was still remembered. And the roofs remained the same, wide and flat, where people went on the most stifling evenings to take their meal.

*Eat your meal, and we will sing to you.
The Kashgar rooster woke at dawn to sing,*

*His loud voice crying roused your sleeping ear,
And with the evening we again are here—
See, moonlight soon will cover everything.
And once again we find you at your ease,
The good and noble surely will know peace...*

They were never allowed to finish the song. People who did not want to interrupt their supper to come down from their roofs rewarded the boys with splashes of water from above. The women leaned over the edges of the roofs, merry from the juice of grapes and figs that fermented in their blood laughing, and dashed icy water onto them, while their husbands held them cautiously around the waist. The sudden shower, coming from an overflow of joy and kind-heartedness, cooled the boys' faces and shone in their hair.

On such evenings it seemed the whole city was feasting on the rooftops. Looking up, you would see people talking quietly, stretching an arm across the narrow alleyway to treat a neighbor to tea or figs. This brief life on the rooftops was a time for rejoicing by all, acquaintances and strangers.

And the choir sang to them:

*The good and noble surely will know peace.
May you know all the blessings Joseph knew—
It is of Joseph we will sing to you.
There were ten brothers, and an eleventh one,
The ten were wicked; Joseph, a good son.
The ten took Joseph hunting far from home,
Cast him down a well, left him alone,
And told their father:
“Wolves devoured our brother.”**

And Joseph told his companions in the dungeon: “This is the meaning of your dreams. You, who pressed the grapes, will serve wine to your master. And you, who dreamed of birds, will be crucified, and the birds will peck your head.” The king of that country also had a dream, and wished to know its meaning:

* This is a free rendering of a traditional children's song.

he saw seven lean cows consume seven fat ones, and also seven green ears of grain and the same number of dry ones. None of his courtiers could interpret this dream. And Joseph's companion from the dungeon was in the palace at that time, serving wine to the king. He remembered how Joseph had told the meaning of his dream, and asked the king to send for him. Joseph was then brought to the court, and gave this interpretation: "For seven years the fields will yield rich harvests. You must command that grain be gathered into the storehouses. In the seven years to follow there will be a drought on the land, and you will feed your subjects with the grain from the storehouses." And Joseph was sent back to the dungeon.

It came to pass as he had foretold: seven years of rich harvests, and seven years of drought. Then the king remembered Joseph, and called for him once more, and Joseph told how he had come to be imprisoned. Zuleika fell to her knees before the king, begging forgiveness for the falsehood she had told against Joseph, and the king forgave her. He placed all the storehouses in his kingdom under Joseph's rule, for him to measure out the grain to the people so that it would suffice them for the seven years of drought.

*See, moonlight soon will cover everything.
And once again we find you at your ease...*

sang the choir of boys, which had now accepted Dushan into its fellowship. And people would come out to thank them with a handful of grapes, bowing, as if it were the singers who brought them the good life they had, and the story of that seven-year drought long ago only served to heighten their appreciation of the quiet, felicitous life in their courtyards, the evening with its brief rain, the laughter of the women—as if the boys had given them all life, so that they might know perfect happiness.

But now September had passed. The choir of boys no longer sang, and together with the rest Dushan was making ready for Grandmother's birthday. She had thought, for some reason, that she would die at sixty-three, like her own mother, but here she had lived to seventy.

"It's not good, not natural," she would say in anger during arguments over how best to celebrate her day. "I haven't made a pact with the Devil, after all. It's better to go when your time comes, not stay too long."

"Who says you've stayed too long?" Everyone was shocked at her words, and Dushan would add:

"Don't listen, Devil," as if the Devil might be offended with Grandmother, and take her away that very moment.

All that could be heard in the house now was "the gardener," "the electrician." They said these words several times each day, and waited for the men's arrival as if it were these two who were to undertake the preparation for Grandmother's day, and once they had appeared everyone in the house would feel easier, and their arguments, now grown frequent, would cease.

At last Father brought round the gardener. Dushan looked at the man joyfully, and at once felt somehow comforted. The others sighed with relief too. Grandmother and Mother were glad they had not left the sick vines unattended. Dushan was glad the gardener had not been crucified—here he was, alive, with his big sickle in a sack, the same man whom the crows had attacked in their street. The bread must have forgiven him. Someone had been crucified in his place, some low, thieving person.

All evening the gardener swung his sickle, and the diseased branches fell to his feet. Amon and Dushan gathered them into piles for burning. Sap oozed out plentifully as soon as the vine was cut, and the gardener rubbed the wounds with healing red clay.

And there was work going on too in the dark room beyond the door, to which Dushan was still not admitted. Some piece of furniture was being moved, and Grandmother stood at the threshold with a lamp to light the room and make sure Dushan did not slip in.

Once the gardener had gone they did not speak any more of him. Now they spoke about where to find an electrician, someone to bring electric light into the dark room. Then Mother and Father whispered for a long time together, trying to decide what they could buy Grandmother for her birthday that would please her.

Dushan wandered around the courtyard, thinking how he could break open his turtle bank and get the money without being noticed. It seemed to him that everyone would be sorry about the bank and feel unhappy. He would bear all the unhappiness himself, sparing the others.

When everyone was busy with something important, he stole up onto the roof. He lifted the bank to his ear and shook it, listened to the rattle of the coins, and then did it. The turtle fell to his feet and broke neatly along the line where the two halves of its shell joined. The coins, oddly, did not scatter. It was as if they had grown to the shell from lying in the bank so long, from their endless transformations into a bull, a rooster, a spider. The coins shone. They filled half the shell.

Now he went calmly all the way down their street and, coming out to the noisy corner at its end, stopped to let the trucks pass. He had never gone this far on his own, but his noble purpose inspired him, making him ashamed of his timidity and irresolution.

All he needed to do was run across the noisy street and go down the sidewalk a little ways.

An old man was standing like himself by the roadside, waiting for a break in the traffic. Suddenly it occurred to Dushan that he ought to help the old man cross the street. The man was looking at him, obviously thinking he ought to help the boy across—then he would be safe too. Their wishes coincided, and this seemed to give them both fresh courage.

Dushan said goodbye to the old man outside the store, and entered. The salesmen were chatting—there were no customers at the moment—and he strolled around a little looking at the goods so as not to interrupt their conversation.

At last one of them turned to Dushan, and he spilled his coins out onto the counter. The man inspected them without touching them. He looked surprised and puzzled, as if stamped on the coins were not two or three lacy patterns but the still-visible silhouette of the bull that had lain in the bank.

He called over another salesman, and the two of them bent motionless over the coins, murmuring something to one another and smiling at Dushan. Then the first man took a red sugar

rooster on a long stick out from somewhere and gave it to Dushan.

He took the rooster and left the store, and the salesmen looked after him, talking among themselves. They forgave him the harmless trick: How was he to know that each time Grandmother rewarded him she took from her music box not real coins, ones in circulation, but old ones from the time of the emirs? She thought real money might spoil the boy's character. The old coins turned the whole thing into an innocent game.

When he had gone a little ways, Dushan licked the rooster. He could not resist. Then suddenly he remembered how yesterday Grandmother had stood all evening at the threshold of the dark room off his, holding the lamp so Mother and Father could work there, and the wick had burned down. She was sad then, and spoke again of the electrician, saying that if he did not come the next day she would decline his services and use a lamp, as she had in the old days.

He liked to watch his grandmother come out of the darkness, holding in her right hand the bronze lamp with its painted floral design and stumpy glass chimney with the flame burning inside. Only half of her face was illuminated, and the light leaped on her hair and shoulder. The other half of her face remained hidden, and she seemed to be carrying some secret. She was mysterious, the expression on her face unreadable—like a person coming from a great distance, someone you gaze at, wondering what he will be like when he stands before you.

Dushan went back into the store. The salesmen, still busy with their conversation, were not surprised, but wary—now he was clearly becoming a nuisance.

"I need a wick for Grandmother," he blurted, afraid they would speak first and send him away. He held out the rooster, wanting to return it.

They were about to get angry, but something held them back. Probably they thought that since they had begun this game so well they should finish it in the same spirit.

"You won't come back again?" asked one of them.

"No," he answered, shaking his head, and put the rooster down. The first salesman bent once more behind the counter

and brought out a white wick. He handed it to Dushan. When the boy had gone he noticed the rooster lying on the countertop and felt sorry. But he was too lazy to go out and stop the boy.

All the way back to their street Dushan examined the wick, trying to understand how the light came out of it, the light that made everything mysterious. He came back into the courtyard to hide his purchase.

Angry faces met him. He started, as if caught doing something not allowed. But then he saw the broken pitcher beside the niche, and felt relieved: the grownups had quarreled because of the pitcher. They were not angry because of his long absence while he made the trip to the forbidden street—they had not noticed.

No one was thinking about him—not when he washed before going to bed, not when he went into his room to lie and think a little while about tomorrow morning, when everyone would get up and begin giving Grandmother presents.

Grandmother went through the door into the room adjoining his, and did not come out again, although he waited a long while, listening hard.

After a long time, he heard her whisper: "Lord, incline your ear. You see my weariness. They are angry with me. I broke the pitcher. I cut the cloth for the kerchief wrong. I went up to the roof to chase away a cat and found the turtle broken. I deceived the boy about the coins, and even had words with the electrician..." She spoke as if the one from whom she expected sympathy were standing over her with head bent, listening.

He would have liked to overhear what else had happened in the house while he was away, but Grandmother fell silent, and then he began to think she must have died, having told the secret of her life, as if she had waited for just this hour to tell it, certain that after her unburdening through words she would go to sleep forever.

He opened the door quietly, and timidly entered, breaking the prohibition. But he did not feel the surprise that touched him each time he uncovered something which up to then had been hidden behind a veil of secrecy. There was simply no time. He bent over Grandmother's face and then checked with his

palm too, feeling her faint, damp breathing against it. He lay the wick beside her pillow and went out, pleased with his stealth and his short, unnoticed stay in the room.

Now he understood why Grandmother had remained there for the night: she had taken a new room, one to live in for the next ten years. After all, she had said not long ago that no one could imagine how tired she was of the walls of her room—she could not look at them without loathing. No warmth came from them, no coolness. It was as if they were not alive. They rejected her, did not console her, did not gladden her life. Once she was seventy she would move to another room, one that would warm her for the next decade. And this was her new room, the room beyond the door.

That was probably the custom: not to show a new room to others, so it would not grow accustomed to them. Not to allow anyone to look at the room's walls, breathe its air, until the true resident was settled. That was why they had not permitted Dushan even to look into the dark room.

Glad that he had comprehended this simple bit of the wisdom of living, and had bought the wick, and just now felt Grandmother's breath, calmed by the thought that she would live another ten years, to resettle again, he quietly began to fall asleep, without the usual starts and night terrors. Now all the days he had passed in the world seemed to him an idyll, undarkened.

II

And now he had made the street his own as well. At first it had seemed to Dushan a world without definite shape: he sensed it through its light and warmth, its smells. In summer it was a world of blinding whiteness, a narrow corridor where the stifling heat, thickened into palpability, swam before your eyes like a swarm of gnats, blurring the lines and curves of the walls. Your nose dried out, and you covered your mouth with your palm lest by mistake you gulp in the astringent, bitter-sharp substance of the heat. It stung your eyes, which were

without protection from the sun: your brows and lashes were so dried up and brittle that if you frowned the least bit, or screwed up your face to mock somebody, they might crumble. The summer was given that you might come to understand your weaknesses (breathing, vision) and your abilities and strengths (legs, hearing).

He understood dimly that the street was magnanimous: not wishing to flaunt its superiority, it blurred its form; scarcely breathing, it hid its lines in the thickness of the heat so as to emphasize the shape of the boy. Feeling that shape, Dushan longed to overcome the weakness of his body. Here was a new trial, one that later inclined him to the philosophical outlook: to go far into the heat, a long way from the house, and learn to breathe in small swallows, holding the air inside for a long time. When he let it back out through his fingers he was surprised by how much it had cooled within him. It refreshed his face. He smiled, and turned aside to conceal the secret of his discovery from a passer-by. The heat made everyone the same, with the same desires—people, and turtle-doves, and trees, the same—and Dushan's secret, this little bit of coolness, raised him above the rest in strength and made him independent as the moon, which cooled you if you looked at it on nights when you could not get to sleep for a long time.

Two feelings struggled within him: compassion, and the desire for independence. If you called everybody together, and told them to inhale, hold their breath, and then all release the air together, it would be a great deal cooler. In winter it would work in reverse. The black people in Africa, where there is no winter or summer, must know this secret. It was silly to fear them for their blackness. When the black man who had been hiding since evening in the grape arbor, or in the lower courtyard behind the oleander bush, would bend over Dushan just as he was falling asleep, breathing into his face, the boy would doze off peacefully. He knew that the black man, who like him had learned the secret of the cooling air, would not hurt him. He would stand over the boy, resting an arm on the head of the bed, one leg behind the other. The black man wore a hat with a wide, curving brim, and carried a cane. He looked on and

smiled. The long row of his teeth, glinting in the darkness, lulled you with their coolness.

Grandmother said the souls of people who had been killed flew to the moon, and then returned to live out their lives as black people. That was why black people always remained children: they danced a lot, and wore almost nothing, and their bodies looked as if they had been rolling in the dust of the street, like naughty little boys.

The grudges left behind after those springtime tussles in the dusty street came back to him now, as the black man with his cane stood at the head of the bed like a bodyguard. They would be there waiting when you came out of the gate, standing along the wall with their pointed noses and chins jutting out, a gleam of mockery in the depths of their eyes. One of them would leap at him, and the others shouted encouragement. At the time, Dushan felt neither fear nor joy. Fights in the springtime beckoned to the resilient body, the hot blood. Later came the fear: he had to walk quietly and carefully past that gate—the boy who lived there had rushed out and pinned him on both shoulders; but Dushan had tumbled the boy from the house over there, and left him humiliated in the sand.

There were more houses in the street he had to pass by stealthily, with bated breath, that there were gates he had marked in his imagination with the sign of victory, the black man's cane. He longed to get over his clumsiness, his weakness, so that by next spring the part of the street he could stroll down without fear would be longer.

Resolution: Jump up and down one hundred times each day on the flagstones in the courtyard, ignoring Grandmother's words; "Don't jump that way! You'll knock the spirit of childhood off you. Later, when you understand that every time of life is precious—childhood, youth, maturity, and old age—you'll be sorry you were so foolish. Don't jump from one to the other—you want to feel life's whole length."

But he held out to the end, and after his hundred jumps fell onto the bed exhausted, thinking that to be a grownup was the same as being tired. That must be the reason Grandmother always said, "Yes, life wears you down."

After she moved into the secret room that opened off his own (the room now contained Grandmother's bed and the low carved table—lower than the bed—with blue legs and a mother-of-pearl top where her glasses and the book that held the answer to every question lay; none of these things was mysterious or alluring to Dushan now), everyone thought that the illness she spoke of so often would stay behind in her old room, that it would not accompany her. But the new room did not accept Grandmother. Grandfather had died in that room, and evidently its life was now made up of memories of him. Or perhaps the room seriously thought that Grandfather, having become a bird in his new life, would return to it, would fly in at the window and build a nest between the frames there, pleased with the snug spot. And the room would warm him, and shelter him from the rain and sun. Whatever the room thought, though, it was not cozy; Grandmother complained that the walls were damp, the air stale. Mother and Father tried to persuade her to leave the room, to move into the one where Dushan, her favorite, had been born. Her favorite would give her health and good spirits, and the dark room would be punished, left without anyone to live in it, without anybody's warm breathing. Its ceiling would be covered with cobwebs and mold. There was no sterner penalty that could be inflicted on a room which has rejected somebody than to stand forever in darkness, not to hear the squeak of its own doors and sparkling windows being opened in the morning; no greater shame than to be unable to drive away the spiders, who would weave their webs before the room's eyes in revenge for the pleasant life it had enjoyed in the past.

But Grandmother would not agree to it. She coughed and accepted her suffering saying that the problem was not the room but herself. If she had trouble sleeping she would recall days when she had hurt Grandfather with harsh words and angry looks. The room where Grandfather had died had let go of everything pure and kind together with his soul, holding what was rough and repellent within its walls to reproach her with later.

"Oh, how hard it is to be good! How easy it is to fall!" she would say in refusing to move to a new place.

Nowadays she was rarely angry with anyone. She spoke quietly and meekly, and Dushan grieved to see that Grandmother no longer took his part. He would come in from the street after being beaten by the boys there, and instead of rushing out of the gate herself she would try to calm him: "Forgive them. It's all right, forgive them." She bent down to him and pressed his hand: "Forgive." Her voice was pleading, as if she had assumed all their guilt and were begging him to forgive her, not them. And she showed an unexpected fondness for his father. If she saw Amon or Dushan disobeying him, or being rude to him, she would say sternly: "Don't behave that way. He's your father, after all." It was true, Dushan thought; he must not be rude to his father. The same thing might happen as with Grandmother—his father's room might reproach him for the rest of his life, giving him no peace.

On Sunday evenings Grandmother would read aloud to his father in Arabic from her book of all knowledge, and they would argue, but it was not like before. Their voices were quiet, friendly:

"What does your book have to say about human anatomy, I wonder?"

Grandmother read: "'Very well,' said the physician. 'Tell me about the root of the veins.' 'The root of the veins,' answered the maiden, 'is the heart vein. From it the other veins branch out. They are many: three hundred and sixty. Allah made the tongue the interpreter, the eyes the lamps, the nostrils the breathers-in of odors, and the hands the graspers. The liver is the seat of kindness, the spleen of laughter. In the kidneys pugnacity resides...'"

"And it's true," she said, closing the book and stroking its deep-blue leather binding. "I've been much quieter and more peaceable since these kidney troubles started."

"And a person with a disease of the liver ought to lose his kindness, is that it?" Father smiled condescendingly from the summit of his scientific knowledge. "Since that book was written, science has found out everything, or nearly everything. The kidneys have nothing to do with it. Or rather, a person with kidney disease can be terribly quarrelsome, and a person with

a healthy liver can be just the same. That's not where the reason lies."

"Well, what is the reason, then?"

"It's a matter of character. This sort of thing depends on upbringing. Of course, now..."

"How tiresome you are, Doctor No-Spa," Grandmother said, getting up and breaking off their argument until the next Sunday.

"We'll think it over for a week. Yes, let's think it over," Father said, getting up too. He paid no attention to the name Grandmother called him—Doctor No-Spa—although the first time she had said that he had been pleased, and repeated it over several times: " 'Doctor No-Spa.' It has a ring to it. Maybe not in Japan or Malaya, but in our clinic a sign on the door: 'Doctor No-Spa, Urologist' would bring everyone knocking out of sheer curiosity."

That name had appeared in the house at the time when Grandmother was suffering with kidney pains. She tried all the remedies, but nothing helped, and Father had said:

"Try taking No-Spa. It's a new medicine they've sent us."

"Something Japanese, or Korean?" asked Grandmother. She was always wary of anything that was called "new," especially if the new thing were connected with medicine.

"No, no—it's a chemical preparation. From Europe... Tablets."

"But the name sounds like a person."

"It's a good name, and a good medicine, too," Father said, trying to win her over and she, seeing that he sincerely wanted to help, replied gently:

"I'm afraid of your medicine, Doctor No-Spa. Please don't be offended."

Everybody was pleased with the way their conversation had ended—on a friendly, family note. Earlier, Grandmother would surely have brushed his suggestion aside with a sarcastic remark: "Do you really believe that your book-learning is better than nature's wisdom?"

Dushan's feelings were mixed: he was pleased that Father and Grandmother had got to like one another, but he was also jealous. He saw his counterpart, the other member of his

pair, becoming more and more distant. Their heart-to-heart talks had grown infrequent, and the story from the *Khazori yak shab** was left unfinished. He could not know, of course, that her withdrawal was something almost instinctive, springing from a self-preserving desire for peace and quiet. She would not expend what strength remained to her on games and noisiness, on fussing with a small boy. So now it was Dushan's mother who had to even out all the new things that were turning up nearly every day in his character—boldness and ambition, jealousy and stubbornness—so that the good and the bad in him would remain in harmony.

“Don't make so much noise! Your grandmother isn't feeling well.” Those words were frequently to be heard in the house now. But it seemed to Dushan they were only said to reprove. There was nothing seriously wrong, no cause for concern: how could Grandmother be ill when she sat with them, ate with them, walked in the courtyard, and talked with the neighbor women, when everything around her, all that she touched, all the things with which she communicated and through which she knew herself as living, were full of vitality and joy?

But sometimes when he sat next to her he would feel a strange uneasiness, a drowsiness. He wondered why no odors came from her now when she bent over him to whisper something. It was not only that her breath was odorless as a toothless, new-born baby's. It was her arms, too, her dress, all of her. She seemed to be without flesh, as if she were made of salt or clean sand. Sand had no smell when you sniffed it, and the lack was displeasing. Everything alive and healthy had its own smell, as well as shape and color.

There were days when Dushan too, after his riotous games and brazen pranks, turned quiet and sad, days when he seemed to be made of sand, like Grandmother. He would wake up and lie for a long time in his bed, feeling an absence of all desires. There was a quietness inside him, and he wanted to cry for no reason, because there was nothing to distract him from the

* *The Thousand and One Nights.*

sorrow. It was always present, in everyone, Grandmother had explained. It ran in a straight black column from the heels to the roots of the hair, and the soul was threaded onto it. On the days when that column, filled to brimming, stirred inside him, Dushan was drawn to his grandmother's room. The red balls on his ceiling exasperated him. He could not fall asleep on the red blanket, and the yellow one made his head ache. On such days those colors were oppressive. Only blue and green—the colors of Grandmother's room—could soothe him, make him feel secluded and protected. Perhaps then he understood what Grandmother said: a person felt more secure living for a long time surrounded by the same things. Her hundred-year-old bed, the ancient cupboard—such accustomed objects prolonged life. Anything that changed frequently was tiring, worrisome, its transience a reminder of the vanity of everything in us and around us.

Mother would watch Dushan sadly withdraw to his grandmother's bed, to its cool, soft blanket of pale blue. She did not know how to help him, how to cheer him up. "What's the matter? Why are you acting like that?" And she would get angry when Grandmother said:

"Leave the boy alone. It's something he has to go through."

"But I can see that he's suffering!"

"In suffering and solitude the soul is born. Let him be. It will soon pass, and he'll be ready to play again."

It was true. The strange mood would go away. He awoke full of longing to be with the others, and his body had a sunburnt smell once more. It was as if he had expended his soul in the rough and tumble of the street, and he needed to retreat, to be alone, so that it could replenish itself. Then his body again yearned to glory in games and frolics.

The grownups, absorbed in their everyday cares, did not notice when Dushan began to go farther and farther away from the courtyard, the grape arbor, the oleander, the darkened room adjoining his own—the world where he was born, which he had learned to know so slowly and painfully, touching it with his soul, and which now understood him and accepted him as its own.

Now there was nothing in the house that excited him. He had learned about all the things in the courtyard and on the roof, and made them his own. Everything had been disclosed, and all the prohibitions removed. The music box had proved to be nothing but another banal object, a container for buttons from many different times—buttons of bone, glass, bronze, and plastic—and for documents from various years, unneeded now, their inscriptions meaningless, preserved as an appendix to the buttons.

He had long since forgotten all his pacts with the courtyard, secret whisperings with his grandfather's bed, and oaths sworn to the oleander. Sober-minded and arrogant, he laughed at his old terrors. He did not understand that having torn all these things from his heart he could never again return to the past, except in memory. He could never again know those emotions, those joys. And to live in the past, as his grandmother did, was dull and sad. Her wisdom was dull too, nodding among her recollections.

Once when Dushan came home from playing in the street, covered in its white dust, and they started to bathe him, Mother was startled by strangeness of his skin. The sleekness of early childhood was gone from his body. She could feel in the dry creases on her son's neck, in his rough, sunburnt hands, in everything about him, that he had pulled away from her. She actually burst into tears: they had overlooked the moment when the world of the street—the world in which the Devil went about in impunity, as Grandmother said—had begun to draw the boy into itself, to lead him farther and farther from his family.

"Street urchin," she called him now when she was angry with him. She did not know that the street had not accepted her son completely, that outside his own gate Dushan often felt lonely. The other boys mistrusted him. They saw that he was gloomy, sullen, and haughty at times. He could not run as well as the others, he got tired, and his manner lacked simplicity and lightness. Even grownups, seeing Dushan strutting beside his gate in a white shirt buttoned all the way up to the neck despite the heat, could not help smiling at his desire to be different.

Someone nicknamed him "the little imam."*

He was willful and easily offended. He told himself there was no need to take anything that lay beyond his gate to heart. It was his duty to love his home and family, but when the street laughed at him he could slam the door on it and withdraw into himself. If the boys hurt his feelings he could stay away from them for a few days, not come out to play, until the injury was forgotten or the guilty ones called him back and admitted he ought to be equal to them in everything, in their games and their daring horseplay. The two or three days he spent in voluntary confinement were not at all boring or irksome. He did not suffer like Amon did when he was kept home as a punishment. He would pretend he was Joseph the Fair, cast into a well by his wicked brothers, but then elevated by his suffering to the height of honor and regard. And having traveled the whole way from humiliation to the peak of glory, with what pleasure he hastened to forgive his brothers! His feeling of compassion for those he had pardoned, of kindness towards them, was so strong that he would cry in secret, as he lay in his bed waiting for sleep. In causing him to suffer his brothers had suffered too, after all. And how fine it was that he did not take some paltry revenge on them, but forgave them!

If the boys came knocking at his gate, called him back to their games, the little imam looked with pleasure into their pleading faces. Even though they considered him weak and unsociable, and mocked him, they missed the gentleness and kind-heartedness Dushan's presence brought into their company. When one of them had hurt his hand, had been beaten or tricked, he would come to Dushan for sympathy. And when Dushan told them stories from the *Khazori yak shab*, mastering his habitual shyness, he saw the brothers he had magnanimously pardoned looking at him as the wisest of them, the most knowing. He felt a boundless joy then, and soon afterwards embarrassment: he knew he would not be able to keep his face stern as the face of an imam should be.

His brother Amon was liked by everyone. He was strong and

* *Imam*—religious preceptor.—*Tr.*

good-natured, and got along easily with both the boys and the grownups. He did not stand out in any way from the company of his classmates, who assembled for their games in the vacant lot behind the house, the same place where the dust devils were born, those cunningly disguised spirits of mischief. Amon was "at home in life," as Father often said. Dushan wearied himself and everyone around him with his sensitivity. Perhaps this was why Amon began early on to feel a hostility towards his brother. The others shunned Dushan, but they were also attracted to him: they all sensed the little imam was more interesting, more mysterious, than his brother.

Amon was often angered by Dushan's refusal to acknowledge his authority as the older brother. Dushan pretended not to need his support in the games and fights of the street, stubbornly trying to keep his distance from Amon in everything. He understood in a vague way that if he were once to give in to the influence of his older brother nothing would remain to him of the calm, self-assurance, and intelligence that beguiled the other boys.

"I'm ashamed to be the brother of a weakling," Amon said. "Do you think it doesn't bother me when I see them shoving you towards the gate, shouting, 'The little imam has a loose tooth,' or 'The little imam has split his trousers'? Do you want to join our gang? We sneak around the back of the bathhouse, where the fence is broken down, and look in at the women through a hole in the frosted glass."

Dushan could not understand what was interesting about peeking in at the women taking their bath. He saw clearly, though, that if a fellow who was already in school brought his younger brother, or a neighbor boy, to the vacant lot—a boy who was not old enough for school yet—the younger would have to follow his orders in everything: run and fetch water, climb up into the mulberry tree and pick its fruit. Of course there was nothing wrong about running home to fetch water for his brother, but somehow it would not be like an ordinary favor. The older boys would speak to him rudely, disdainfully, wanting to demonstrate their superiority. How could he consent to be a subordinate among them when boys his own age often looked at him in awe?

Peeking into the women's bath was forbidden, indecent. And surely the sight of them could not be as exciting as the words of the woman whom Dushan had already seen several times in the street. In the evening, while he was watering the street outside the house to cool the air, a woman in a green dress had watched him for a long time. Somehow he knew she was admiring him. Finally she said, "It's too bad you're not my brother. I would love you very much."

Dushan hurried into the house, embarrassed. But the next time he saw her, coming from far away, he stood his ground and put on a calm, indifferent face that he had practiced many times in front of a mirror, preparing for this meeting. The woman smiled at him, and Dushan looked after her for a long time, feeling sorry for her because she had no brother.

How thrilling his secret was! "It's too bad you're not my brother. I would love you very much." No one knew their secret, only he and the woman. There was no one to make coarse jokes and laugh. Waiting for her at the gate, the way she looked at him—he could cling to that from the moment he woke until he slept again, could live with that, forgetting all of his hurt pride.

The strange feeling aroused by the woman in the street—not so much by the woman herself as by her words—would not let him sleep. It was summer, his bed had been carried out into the upper square of the courtyard, and Dushan tried to drive away the unrestful thoughts by pondering the difference between the shadows cast by the moon and the daytime shadows of the sun. It seemed to him the moon brought its own shade, together with its light. The moonshadows would stretch out, clinging to the leaves of the grape vine or the shutters. Later they were blown away by the cool breeze, and his bed was exposed to a desolate, troubling light. If he had not gone to sleep in time, while the soft, pacifying shadows lasted, he knew he would lie awake until dawn, unless Grandmother let him come to her bed. The moon's shade was dark-blue, thick: if you stuck your hand into it, the hand would vanish, and when you pulled it out again it smelled of pollen. The sun burned up its own shadow, leaving only a faint outline. As you ran along the street in

the daytime you could feel salt crinkling in your mouth, as if the cinders of the shadow the sun had consumed were salty. The moon was always sprightly, in a hurry, drawing its shadows along after it. The sun could hang in the same place all day, and then roll down the sky unexpectedly. But until the moon had come and gone, distributing its bountiful coolness, the pitiless, imperturbable sun could not rise—Dushan understood that well.

All of this troubled him on another night too, as he lay awake trying to remember where he had hidden his old turtle-bank. He had wanted to put it under his bed that evening, so he could carry it into the street as soon as he woke in the morning. A boy would be there waiting—a boy as silly as he himself had been in the days when he was a passionate collector of coins. The boy had been ill with a fever, and now he sat glumly beside his gate, and his face had a yellowish cast. Dushan had wanted to cheer him up somehow, and promised to give him the bank. The yellow-faced boy brightened for a moment, but then he put an affected expression and said that a bank without coins was like a belly without food, and his parents were stingy. So Dushan promised that if he were given a coin for some reason he would not spend it, but bring it to be deposited in the bank. The rascal had agreed to that.

"It's probably in the summer room, in the niche on the right," Dushan thought, and decided to go and get it right away, so he could fall asleep in peace. But it was not all that easy to get into the summer room, even though its windows opened right onto the upper square where he lay, a little ways from his mother and grandmother. Grandmother was a light sleeper, and if he made a sudden noise she might cry out, thinking that robbers had stolen over their wall on a long ladder and jumped down into the courtyard in padded boots. She would frighten Mother too, and they would cry out together, making such a fuss that Father and Amon, sleeping on the lower square, would be wakened as well. The men, pretending not to be the slightest bit afraid, would hasten to turn on the lights so they could get a better look at everything.

When Dushan slept in the men's half of the courtyard, to

the right of his father's bed, he often waited for the moment when they would have to save the women's half from plunder and disgrace. He would see then whether Father was brave, and how Amon would act, after all his bullying. He had heard a great many stories about these night-time robbers. They roamed the streets while it was still evening with their long ladders, choosing a place to make their raid. They carried suitcases with the padded boots they put on so they would not make any noise. Dushan would lie staring at the wall: the hands would appear first, and then a head in a felt hat, a fez—he had heard that the leader of the bandits was Javad the Turk. He listened intently: Would the rustling come again? Finally, exhausted, he would creep up from the lower square to Grandmother's bed, snuggle against her, and quickly fall asleep. It must have been that she, who most feared the robbers in the night, was comforted to feel his body, and so in turn was able to comfort him.

At first Grandmother would give a little scream, pretending she was surprised at finding him in her bed when she woke. Later it was decided to move his bed to the women's half, and Amon said:

"I've known for a long time that you're really a girl—ever since you wanted to keep your underpants on in the bathhouse."

Amon would certainly relish the opportunity to taunt him again if now he were to bump into some sharp corner, some unexpected object in the darkness, and everyone awoke to find that it was not Javad the Turk crawling towards the summer room. All he had to do was keep from looking at Mother or Grandmother—he had heard that even sound sleepers could be wakened by an anxious, frightened look.

He had crossed the threshold and was about to get to his feet. Suddenly he froze, terrified. Father was whispering there inside the room. Something must have happened: Mother and Father had left their beds in the courtyard and retired to this dark room so that no one would discover their secret. What were they talking about? What was it they were doing that neither he, nor Amon, nor Grandmother was meant to see? It was strange, puzzling. He lay for some time without stirring.

Then he heard Father whisper again, and Mother sighed her answer in the darkness, and somehow he understood, or rather sensed, that his eavesdropping was shameful, that he might learn something forbidden, something secret belonging to his parents' world.

And when Dushan lay on his bed again, hoping to fall asleep quickly so he would not hear his mother and father come quietly out into the courtyard and return to their own places—Mother to her bed near his own, Father to the lower courtyard (once before, half asleep, he had seen them emerge noiselessly from the summer room, although he had not thought anything about it then)—he suddenly realized that an awesome thing had taken place: the secret of their names had been relinquished. Among the whispers and the words spoken unintentionally aloud, he had clearly heard Father call Mother ‘‘Mastura-apa’’. And she, too, had lifted the ban from his name: ‘‘Ravshan-aka’’.* Dushan had known these names of theirs before, but it had seemed to him they were not the real ones: his parents went by them in everyday life, never speaking their real names aloud, even to each other. Perhaps even out their wedding day they had not dared whisper their real names to one another, fearing that when much time had passed their love might depart, and one of them, in spite, would want to harm the other: Father, hearing that a child had been born to the neighbors, might go to them and sell Mother’s secret name, given as a gift on the day of love.

It was silly to think that it was all because he could not go to sleep right away and was afraid he would see them come out. But why had they called each other by those everyday names, the trivial ones spoken by everybody? Perhaps they had heard him slinking towards the summer room, and had spoken those names to deceive him. And now, as he lay in his bed, they whispered once again their intimate, hidden names, which they spoke seldom and cautiously, and also in those moments when they were so happy and carefree they were not afraid to disclose themselves and die.

**Apa*—sister; *aka*—brother.

He was astonished, too, that Mother should speak to Father not only as "Amon's father," concealing his name, but also as "Brother Ravshan"—brother, not husband. And he had not called her wife, not "Amon's mother," but "Sister Mastura". This was very strange: Dushan knew that sisters could not marry their brothers, that it was not desirable for even distant relations to marry.

Once, when Amon's teasing made him so angry he could not bear it any longer, he had asked Mother:

"Why couldn't I have had a sister instead?" She was curious to know why he had said that, and Dushan, who always tried to avoid complaining about his brother, had said:

"So I could marry her."

Mother had spent a long time explaining why brothers and sisters could not marry, but he did not understand. It seemed to him that a sister would be the perfect companion: having grown up in the same family, they would be more gentle and attentive to each other than any outsider could, however loving.

*Alyona, Alyona, sister mine!
Come out, come out onto the bank!
Ivan, Ivan, my brother dear,
A stone so heavy pulls me down....*

That was from a Russian fairy tale—somehow it lingered in his memory.

Dushan thought his mother would probably have been far happier married to a brother, instead of "Amon's father," a man who had been a total stranger until she became his wife. And was this not a game they played, a pact between them: in sweet, special moments to address each other not as husband and wife, not as the father and mother of Amon, but as brother and sister? In the game, they had known each other always, been born and grown up in the same house, been loved equally, and were happy in the love they had received, had not wasted. It would be a torment, he knew, to live with one who had been loved less than you, who had been often hurt and deceived—

Grandmother had told him such people grew up to be greedy in love, never satisfied, concerned only with themselves.

Maybe Amon did not have enough love to satisfy him—was that why he was so overbearing with his brother? If only Dushan could feel himself loved as Amon was, could be so much at ease with everybody! What more could Amon want? People looked at Dushan with interest, and came to listen to him—the boy to whom he had given the turtle-bank had found the right words for what everyone felt about the little imam: "Thank you. I respect you." But they loved Amon. How could it be that love wanted to play the tyrant? There was no other way to describe the way Amon behaved when the grownups were not home: he took pleasure in sitting on Dushan, making him crawl around the courtyard on all fours, and purposely thought up games he knew Dushan would lose. Dushan would try high-mindedly to ignore his brother's cheating.

Grandmother was surprised to see that Amon, not Dushan, was growing up to be more and more like his grandfather, the judge—in his manner of speaking, his walk, and even the expression on his face. It seemed to her that Amon was following in the footsteps of his grandfather, and therefore that their fates must coincide in many ways. Watching Amon grow, she saw how his grandfather had been before she first knew him. Now the whole length of his life lay before her, from birth to death, and she must have rejoiced in the feeling that he had not come to her from a family of strangers but was as a brother to her, one with whom she had grown, and for whom she was now not only a wife, the "mother of Mastura," but a sister.

Could his grandfather, the judge, have sat as haughtily as Amon did, listening to Grandmother read the old letters kept in the music box, translating from the Arabic—letters sent to Grandfather long ago, asking him to commute a sentence or grant a pardon?

"O you who indulge your slaves! I, the lowest of your slaves, who pray to God for your good health, who strive only to gratify you, your slave Istam-Hodja, petition my lord in the hope that he may grant his mercy and agreement that I sacrifice myself a thousand times for the beloved and venerated head of

my lord. O my lord, o you who indulge your slaves! With a thousand stumblings and embarrassments, like the lame ant who brought as a present to Solomon, the wisest of kings, the thigh of a locust, I present you in token of my service and my beseeching one dish of bread, seven loaves of sugar, seven packets of tea, seven boxes of candied fruits, and seven dishes of fresh fruit. These I have brought to the learned house of my lord, begging that he look down on them with favor. I have sinned, I am blameworthy, forgive me. I have sinned, I am blameworthy, forgive me. I have sinned, I am blameworthy, forgive me..." That was repeated seven times in the letter. As Grandmother read, and Amon pictured himself as the haughty judge to whom this plea was addressed, Dushan could not free himself of the nagging feeling that someone was trying to humiliate him. Perhaps it was that repeated phrase, "I have sinned, I am blameworthy, forgive me," that embarrassed and disturbed him, or perhaps he was troubled by the image of the lame ant bringing the thigh of a locust to the judge. Grandmother, noticing how sensitive he became after the reading of these old petitions, tried to calm him:

"It's just the way people wrote in those days. See, here's the date: 1904, by the reckoning they use now."

That number, 1904, meant nothing to him. He had a different sense of time altogether: not as duration, growing from year to year, but as something condensed into a body. Once a grownup, coming down their street, had seen Dushan trying to climb up into a tree and shouted to him, "Look out, you'll fall and kill yourself!" The answer came in a quiet, confident voice:

"I shall live as long as my grandfather—seventy-two years."

It was strange, this passing of time not in length but within itself, this ability to condense itself. Dushan became aware of it on the day Amon was taken to the hospital (appendicitis was suspected). All the time his brother was absent, Dushan felt a special love for him: the love that seemed to have been scattered forever by the many days of injuries and anger was suddenly gathered together in him again. He wandered in the still, worrying house, touching all the things that were dear to

Amon—his books, his bed, his wooden saber lacquered silver—and it was as if he touched his brother's soul, trying to cheer him. Dushan experienced so much in those two or three days Amon was in the hospital that he understood: the time repeated each day in the rising of the sun, in the sameness of noon and evening, which pretended to be helping people live, in fact passed by unnoticed. When you looked carefully, not one morning was like its predecessor. And it was this time passing, which was called “growing up” and “starting school”, that took away, as it departed, his love for his brother, for their courtyard, for the music box.

But there was another, inner time, when worries came and you missed someone, as he missed Amon, and then you felt the love again. And now a new thing troubled him:

“What did I feel when I was born?”

The question seemed so difficult to the grownups that at first they tried to wave it away:

“You’re the one who ought to know that!”

“What did you feel, Grandmother? And what about you, Mother?”

“I don’t remember.”

“And what does a person feel when he’s dying, Grandmother?”

“It must be that a person gets so tired from the time he has lived he doesn’t feel anything.” But it seemed the whole family reflected afterwards, in secret, on the question of what a baby must feel at its birth, and why it was thought that an infant had not been born to live if it did not break into cries at that moment. After all, it seemed crying should go with death, and rejoicing with life.

“Yes, it is strange,” Father said with a frown. “Why do we cry? Wouldn’t it be better to announce our birth with a whoop?”

The question was complex, tangled. Various sides of it could be comprehended and explained, although two differing interpretations were advanced—as was always so in their family when the theme was “life and death.” One was scientific, educational, and came from Father and Mother: “It is well understood now

that at the moment of birth an infant experiences shock. After developing in complete silence, in darkness, and in near motionlessness, he comes into a world of blinding light, frightening sounds, colors, and unfamiliar odors. And his first response to it all is to cry. It's as if the baby, with his wail of despair, were declaring his right to live." The other interpretation was founded in common sense, the wisdom of living, and came from Grandmother: "You're talking about the beginning—what about afterwards? I just remembered something Amon's grandfather used to say: 'Our life has forty pleasures, and three hundred sorrows.' We sense that at the moment of birth—and it makes us cry."

"It that a proverb?" Father was perplexed.

"No—it was just that for him the year and every part of our life was made up of numbers, as if he looked into the depths of things and reckoned everything up. If he saw the harvest wasn't going to be good, he would say, 'Well, we must prepare ourselves. It seems this year will bring us seven satisfactions and eighty disappointments.' It's a pity that our Amon isn't at all like him in that. Amon doesn't have a feel for numbers, and without that a person can't see the degrees, the way years that have passed build up around the soul in rings, like in the trunk of a tree, and keep it from taking flight."

These things seemed far away to Dushan, and difficult to comprehend like everything connected with old age and going away. Now he was disturbed by something he had learned not long ago: he had been born in the summer room, that room in which he had always seen something mysterious and alluring. Its ceiling was nearly twice as high as the other rooms', and there was no ladder up onto its roof—the only place in the house that Dushan, or even Amon, had never explored.

In the winter and spring no one lived in it. Dushan looked into its darkness through the bottom of its frozen windows, which reached from the floor right up to the ceiling, trying to see who it was moving about noisily in the evenings, sighing. Grandmother explained that there was nothing to be frightened of: no devil or jinn inhabited the room in the family's absence. It was only that the thin, light walls had trouble breathing in the

winter air. In the sun, those walls were nearly translucent. Driven into the summer room out of the heat of the day, Dushan would lie and watch tiny silhouettes gliding over the carved ceiling, which was painted light-blue with red trimmings. His grandmother or mother, standing in the courtyard, would appear above him. The images traveled a complicated path through the glass panes, through the gaps in the shutters where the stucco ornaments had broken off, and past the brass handles. On the brightest days, when the sunlight, refracted on the neighbors' windows, entered the room through a secret passage, the images of people going by in the street would appear too. They had to use all their cunning to get into the summer room—squeeze through the openings in the right wall between the six niches (it was through them that the room sighed in wintertime) and sparkle in the antique jasper chandelier—all to dance for a moment on the ceiling.

On rare occasions an astounding sight would present itself: Mother or Grandmother, standing in the courtyard, would meet on the pale blue background with people passing in the street. Dushan waited anxiously to see if they would stop to talk, and if the silhouettes halted, lost among the carved ornaments, he would rush out into the glare and stifling heat of the courtyard: it seemed to him that by some miracle the neighbor woman, whose silhouette he had seen just now on the ceiling, would be there with Grandmother, chatting unconcernedly. This happened several times before he understood: people's shadows lived a life of their own. Separated from its owner by a trick of the sun, the shadow leaped about as it pleased, penetrating into hidden places, meeting the shadows of others, chatting with them, complaining of its owner's miserliness or praising his virtues. Now when one of the grownups would suddenly throw open a window in the summer room Dushan was petrified with dismay: What if the shutters slammed back on someone's shadow, some visitor who had dropped in for a moment to talk with Grandmother's shadow or the neighbor woman's?

It was not surprising, then, that Mother had given birth to him and his brother in the summer room, and that she whis-

pered Father's name there in secret. And Grandmother often said that although it would be blasphemy to pray you would die in a special place she knew fate would take pity on her and she would meet her end in the cool and quiet of that room.

Perhaps shadows went on living after their owners had gone, and Grandmother thought that sometimes her shadow, coming in from the street, would meet Mother's as she hurried about the courtyard. Then they could talk things over: whether life was going well, whether the children obeyed. And Mother, without knowing anything about the shadows' conversation, would feel a sadness and remember Grandmother.

Lying in the coolness of the room where the mystery of life and death was accomplished, he thought about what the woman had said the one whom the boys in the street called the praying mantis because she always wore green, stepping cautiously in the dust. There was something odd about her walk: it was as if she were making a little bow at every step.

"It's too bad you're not my brother. I would love you very much." Now that he had heard Mother and Father whispering in the summer room, calling one another "brother" and "sister", he could hear something new in her words, something more than kindness: "She wants me for her husband." This strange and at first implausible thought disturbed him more and more, for now pity had begun to be mingled among the feelings the mantis-woman's appearance awoke in him.

He had heard other women saying bad things about her and using her to berate their husbands: "You can go to the woman who lives in the attic, then. She would take anyone!" He had seen them whisper to one another as she passed by and look after her disapprovingly. In the dustiest part of the street she would take off her sandals and go barefoot through the vacant lot to her second-storey room. Dushan would run up onto the roof and watch her until the boys began their song and the mantis-woman disappeared into her little house:

*The leaf is green, and green the dress the mantis wears,
Bowing low as dawn sheds its first light upon the tree.*

*Morning, noon, and evening find her at her prayers.
She entreats the sun and rain, the honey-bearing bee.
The leaf curls in the rain: the mantis shelters there.
It withers in the sun: still she does not complain.
She bows again, and thinks as she repeats her prayer:
"If I do not appease the honeybee today,
If I do not endure the sun and clouds and rain,
The dawn will not return to drive the night away."*

The strange image of the woman in green, the song the boys sang to taunt her, the play of shadows on the ceiling of the summer room, the meaning he had discovered in secret names, his parents' whispers in the darkness—all of this suffused his soul, that world which more than any other has need of a protective screen of illusion and mystery. From the tastes and predilections of his grandmother, mother, father, and brother, from the way they acted and the things that concerned them, he could divine the existence of a world other than the one around him, a world that everyone carried inside. Grandmother had told him the soul was like a bee that gathered pollen from a thousand flowers to make a drop of honey.

*"If I do not appease the honeybee today,
If I do not endure the sun and clouds and rain,
The dawn will not return to drive the night away."*

He thought he understood: Wasn't it that to be deceitful, cruel, and petty meant never to appease the bee that brought the honey? That only the pure and meek, whose souls were bright and calm, could bear the sun and rain and clouds—all the things that brought sorrow and pain? And that it was only on account of them that the morning came after every night? Worrying about these things, begging Grandmother for explanations, he groped little by little towards an understanding of what he had heard and seen. And how astonished he was to learn that Grandmother's world was as strange and fascinating as his own!

"I just can't understand what's going on," she complained

often. "Everything drifts past, slips away. I live here with all of you, we talk and smile to one another, but it seems to me I'm really somewhere far away. Could it be that my ghost is smiling and nodding to you from another time and I'm not here at all? It was only yesterday we believed that around any corner you might meet a turtle that talked, or a cat that carried its master's cane. And everything was simple, familiar. Now there's an explanation for everything, but somehow it's all so confused and complicated. Amon was telling me yesterday about rocks on the moon."

How strange; they did not live together in the same time, side by side. Time was like a ray of sunshine that struck a prism and broke apart. They caught onto different parts of its length and hung there, fluttering—Grandmother in her amazement and Amon, her "scientific boy". Time hovered over them like a chimera, like the creature in the fairy tale with the face of a hag, the breast of a maiden, and the legs of a baby ("When my legs grow up they'll make a dainty dish. I'll boil them in a cauldron and serve them to my sweetheart."). And the world itself was divided into different ages. Wasn't that why everyone had an inside world, the one he knew and felt, where in solitude he dreamed of a mantis-woman who spoke to him, where he suffered fears and tasted secret longings? Wasn't that why Grandmother could not stay awake through the day now? In the afternoon, during the hottest part of the day, she would fall asleep beside Dushan as he watched the shadows on the ceiling of the summer room. She dozed off quietly and without warning, in the middle of a sentence. Dushan no longer slept in the daytime, and if Mother was not too busy she would come to teach him numbers and letters—soon he would start school. But he was lazy, he yawned. It was so stuffy. Mother got angry and went away, and he wondered why he could not remember the numbers. After all, everyone said he was a smart boy.

Earlier, when Dushan still took an afternoon nap, it had seemed to him that by dividing the daytime in half he had not felt its whole length and so had missed something very important. He would ask, "What happened while I was sleeping? Who

came to visit?" The day prepared itself in advance, from sunrise to sunset, considered everything: whether it would be clear and sunny or bring rain in the afternoon and blow sand off the roof towards evening. And people should be awake through all of it, ready to live through all that the day would bring. If someone went to sleep, turned away from the hours of light, the day would feel cheated and would not fail to punish the sluggard with a disease or a fit of the sulks when he woke up.

But Grandmother would surely be pardoned for her naps. Her illness wearied her, and after sleeping she felt a little better. How could someone who was old and weak be expected to stand erect before the stern face of the day, be denied clemency?

But in July, during the hottest days of the year, when everyone else was languid and enervated, Grandmother felt a new influx of strength. She no longer slept in the daytime; she prepared meals and went to visit the neighbor women. In this month long ago, she had born her first child, and her body, remembering, mustered all its forces to help her with a new birth. The misguided energy was expended in conversations, in smiles and laughter, so that everyone said: "She's like a new woman." Grandmother had forgotten how to bear children and instead had given birth to herself.

Dushan sensed that it was wrong to withdraw to the inside world, to detach himself from the world around him and from the boys' games when he was beaten or insulted. The beauty of the light and shadows on the ceiling came from the outside. And unless he lay looking at the moon for a long time in the night, he did not feel the full depth of pity for the people who had been murdered, whose souls returned to live out their appointed time as black people, hiding in the darkness under the grape arbor and with their glances lulling to sleep children as defenseless as themselves.

Whenever he examined an ordinary mulberry leaf he was awed by its formal beauty. How had this wonder been created? How did it grow, spring after spring, never forgetting its shape, the shape of a human hand? The new leaves were like his own hand, and the old, dusty ones were like Grand-

mother's—they had their beauty too: the corners had still not shriveled, and the delicate stem, from which the trembling leaf was hung, had not yet split or cracked. How did the leaf remember how big to grow, so it would not get too heavy and break the stem? With what memory did it know the way to spread its veins and the destined shape that made it beautiful?

There was so much beauty in everything—an oleander blossom, the shape of a butterfly, flowing water with the sun playing on it. But water's beauty was best seen in a dewdrop suspended from a flower. You could watch as a sunbeam sought out the droplet, began to wind it on its thread and pull it away; watch greedily and with regret: another moment and the drop would vanish into the air. It was the same with butterflies: a hundred of them surprised and dazed you, covering the front garden in red, lending their beauty to the grass and bushes. But to see the beauty of the butterfly itself you had to look attentively at just one: at every line of its body, the blue specks on the wings, and the silvery powder dusted on with such care, so as not to spoil the pattern. It seemed if the butterfly were to flutter its wings the powder would shade off and the color would change.

Astonishing: all of this beauty seemed to have nothing to do with him. Dushan reflected that the old mulberry tree on the lot behind the house had been growing before he was born, and they said it would grow for a hundred years more. It was difficult even to catch an ordinary butterfly so you could enjoy its beauty. How many times had the thorns pricked him before he succeeded in picking a rose for Grandmother when she was ill? And the neighbor boy, the one whose looks all the grown-ups admired so—how stuck-up and hardhearted he was! His nickname was "the stupid peacock".

All of this beauty surrounding him looked at him indifferently. He had often felt a coldness steal into him when he looked for a long time at the leaves of the mulberry. But if he withdrew into himself, in the time before sleep or on the days when he did not want to see anyone or go out into the street, his soul would warm up again. And then he was sorry he had disappointed Mother and wanted to be kinder to Amon, to

forgive everyone for everything. These melancholy moods did not usually last long. It seemed nature made provision for such days and remembered about the time. She prudently led the boy away when he was tired out by beauty, so that in solitude he could recover his soul, which gathered pollen from a thousand flowers, like a bee, to make a drop of honey.

And how much excitement there was in the street when preparations were being made for a party or a wedding! Everywhere you would hear: "Oliya will be there. Have you heard? Oliya is going to dance." The name was pronounced with awe by the grownups and Dushan's playmates alike. They spoke of the famous ruby bracelets, each the width of four fingers, which Oliya wore on her wrists and ankles—they were gifts from her admirers. They jangled with every movement of her lovely body.

Those who could not get into the courtyard where the wedding was would climb trees to see Oliya's dance, would stand entranced on rooftops. When the merry-making was over they would talk about that evening for a long time: "No, that's now how its was. First Kamol, the teacher—he had drunk a lot of wine—threw a hundred-rouble note at her feet. It was a challenge. And then Nuriddin-Devona,* the bus-driver, threw down three hundred-rouble notes at once. There's a man for you! He wanted to give her more, even, but his wife dragged him away in time."

That was madness—throwing money at the feet of a dancing girl. But it had something splendid in it too. Nuriddin's sons swaggered around like heroes, looking disdainfully at Amon and Dushan, whose father (although a learned man, conversant in French, a language no one in Bukhara had known before) was a mere doctor and took no part in the grand sprees of the other men from their street.

"Beauty blinds people, stupefies them, and they throw money away," Grandmother explained. "In my day they used to throw the keys to estates at the feet of dancing girls—barbarians and pagans!"

* *Devona*—the possessed.

But those revels, the ones the whole street would talk and argue about for days afterwards, did not come often. People gathered for one or two other celebrations: "days of the young wind" in the spring and the "farewell to the wind" in the fall. They flew kites then: hundreds of kites, three-cornered, six-cornered, kites of every color, swam in the sky, wagging their tails, thrilling the boys whose kites rose above the others. It must have been because the game itself was bound to welcoming the wind and saying farewell to it, bound to the sight of the clouds and the sky, the singing of the kites and the mysterious high places to which they ascended, that it had no clamorousness about it, no spirit of rivalry, like during Oliya's dance. Up on the roofs, flying their kites, everyone was polite and thoughtful. If a kite which had been tied to a tree branch for the night so it could sing the courtyard to sleep were to break away and soar into the sky, the forlorn owner would be given kites by his neighbors: it was believed that unless everyone greeted the wind and bade it farewell the summer would bring draught.

Why did the beauty of Oliya madden and debase, while the beauty of the flying kites, of the clouds and wind, made people gracious and compassionate? Grandmother smacked him on the shoulder: "Don't think too much. A person who goes off into himself might lose his vision or hearing at an early age. The eyes were meant for looking, and the ears for listening."

"But you said yourself that some people have eyes turned inwards, for seeing into the depths of things."

Who were they, those people with inward sight and hearing? Perhaps they too were undergoing some slow transformation. Not long ago he had heard Father reading to Mother from a medical book about people with the hands of monkeys or the legs of elephants, people who sat the way a pointer-dog did. Dushan saw this as confirmation of the metamorphoses in Grandmother's stories (a wolf turned into a prince, a cheating merchant into a turtle) and Mother's scientific explanations ("Where did people come from?" "From the apes.").

Probably the people with a monkey's paw or the leg of an elephant were gradually becoming new creatures, with shapes as

surprising and beautiful as their human form: a dog-bird, a man-ape, a mantis-woman.

“A boy got lost and fell asleep under a tree. A mantis-woman noticed him and saw that he was very handsome. She swayed back and forth, bowing before him, and then lifted him carefully, without waking him, and carried him off to her little green house.”

That last spring before he started school he was taken into the company of boys who played in the vacant lot, which for some reason was always called “polyanka”—the Russian word for a clearing in the woods: “*Az polyanka dur narav*”;^{*} “*Polyankadagi tut kuk, atchik.*”^{**} Earlier Dushan had thought that people only spoke Uzbek in the country, where his grandfather lived, or that only a few Uzbeks lived in the city, brought from far away by old families as husbands for their sickly daughters, to give fresh vigor to the line—as his grandfather, the judge, had brought Father. But there were Uzbek boys among his new playmates, boys who came to the vacant lot from a neighboring quarter. And if one of the Tajik boys, during an argument over some trifle, insulted the Uzbeks with the name “outsider”, the Uzbek boys would point to Dushan as proof of their worth: the most intelligent member of their company, and the calmest, was an Uzbek.

“No, only half... I want to be friends with everybody.”

“You’re all Uzbek, just like your father. And your family name is Uzbek—Temuri,” they whispered to him as they sat under the mulberries. “Be our chieftain.”

“What would I do?”

“When someone insulted us you would give us the sign to beat him.”

“No—why should we fight? I would make peace between you.” And he begged them all to forgive the affronts of the others, not to fight.

“He really is a little imam,” the boys said in despair. At such moments Dushan felt with a special pang that neither

* Don’t go farther than the clearing (*Tajik*).

** The mulberries in the clearing are blue and sour (*Uzbek*).

the Tajik nor the Uzbek boys really thought of him as one of them, although if he had done as they wanted, led them into battle or taken sides in their arguments, everything would have been different. But in doing that wouldn't he lose his selfhood, become like all the rest? If he were meant for that he would have been born like Amon, obliging and a bit crafty—that is, full of brimming life.

For the first few days Dushan was diffident among these new playmates. They had been coming to the vacant lot for a long time, had their own topics of conversation and their favorite places in the shade of the mulberries lining the roads at either side of the open place. The trees were divided justly among them, and in the springtime no one would dare gather the fruit of another's tree.

That spring Dushan, as a full-fledged member of the group, was given half a tree—the whole left side of a blue mulberry. He never got to harvest the fruit though: people came from the country with sickles and pitchforks to cut the branches and take the leaves away to feed the amazing worms that wove silk thread. By evening the trees were bare, and the vacant lot lay revealed between the two roads, from the walls at one side all the way to the other, where the abandoned mosque stood atop its marble staircase, with the little attic to one side where the mantis-woman lived.

The boys sat on the broken flagstones of the porch, under the blue ceiling with its painted decorations, each gazing at his own tree, stripped of leaves and berries. They looked, and soon forgot their grieving. Two of them began whispering. Already they had gone around a corner of the fence, laughing to themselves, and the others, guessing the secret, stole after them. At the very moment when one of the two had let down his trousers and the other held a brush poised above his naked backside, ready to paint a long, indecent expression there to shock and provoke the rest, the whole company fell upon the jokesters. The outcome of their trick was that both went home bedaubed from head to foot with india ink. Their injured pride healed itself in the night, as they lay sleeping. The usual amusements of boys—the stories about marriages at fourteen, about

pictures from the secret life of grownups that they looked at on the sly, the laughter and the crude expressions—all these the little imam regarded as frivolous. But there were other times, too, evenings when they were subdued—most often at the end of a summer day, when the cool breeze was blowing—pleasant hours when out of the darkness a voice could be heard relating the endless tale of Emir Timur, son of the Two-Horned Iskander,* scourge of unbelievers, pagans, and evil-doers in all countries and lands, sworn enemy of sorcerers and mischief-makers.

As he distanced himself more and more from his own family Dushan began to observe the adults in their street with care, singling out the most comical of them, whose favorite sayings, gait, or gestures he could mimic for his audience in the vacant lot. (His weakening love for his own thus manifested itself in irony towards strangers.) His parodies often undid him though, caused him anguish—like the dark words, resembling a spell, spoken by the sick woman who lived on their street, who sat for days at a time beside her gate. She caught the little imam mocking her, parroting the phrase she liked to repeat to passers-by: “Everyone walks, but my legs are frail as a bird’s. Everyone eats his fill, but my poor throat cannot swallow a grain. Everyone sings, but my tongue is numb.”

At first he had admired the woman’s skill in “showing off” her sickness and gaining pity (the passer-by never failed to ask if she had water in her cisterns, whether her courtyard had been swept). But then he saw that behind this comparison of herself to a weak-legged bird lay a special cunning, the sort of people who have been ill for a long time show towards the healthy. What could be more shameless and stupid than thinking of herself as a bird? And a “Biblical” bird at that, a turtle-dove—they seldom sang, and turned aside from large grains.

Her amusing performance soon began to irritate once he had guessed the conceit, and he itched to ridicule the woman, to put her in a slightly different light and make her laughable. And

* The Two-Horned Iskander—one of the Eastern names for Alexander the Great.

then the dove-woman, wounded by the derision of the kindest and gentlest boy in their street, had wished him that strange thing, the sense of which he could not at first understand.

He got through the hours until bedtime somehow. Then he took his question-book out of the cupboard, careful that no one should see, and wrote:

"Wy shudnt you eet sumwon elsez fude?" For a long time he could not get to sleep, wondering how Mother or Grandmother would answer his question. It was they who had invented this game, to interest him in writing. He put down his questions, and read their replies.

In the morning he found his spelling corrected: "Why shouldn't you eat someone else's food?" And the answer: "Because a person should not stuff himself from tail to ears when others are going hungry." The handwriting was Mother's, but the part about stuffing yourself from tail to ears gave Grandmother away: the question was complicated, with moral implications, so she had dictated the response.

But that was not what he wanted to know. Probably he had phrased his question wrong. He was cross and refused to eat his breakfast until they told him what the bad thing was that the woman had wished him. "What woman?" "The one who sits by her gate. I was imitating her—I know it was wrong." Father even put off leaving for work, curious about what had happened. He stood flipping irritably through a book in a dark-blue cover, his constant companion in those days—an amusing French fable, *Aucassin and Nicolette*. It was his favorite reading, and he would repeat those names to himself for no reason—"Aucassin and Nicolette," giving the vowels their French sounds—as he hurried through the courtyard. He did not hear Grandmother's scoffing: "European!"

"May you eat the food of strangers in their midst all your life"—that's what she wished me."

"How could she say such a thing to a child—and what does it mean?"

"It's just nonsense, the superstitions of an uneducated woman," Father said reassuringly. "You've heard the expression, 'The bitter bread of banishment.' But what could that have to

do with our Dushan?"

Grandmother had gone to pay a morning call on a neighbor—it was one of those rare days when she felt better—and the subject was dropped abruptly so that Dushan would recover quickly from his fright. Still, without Grandmother's word as the head of the family, he did not feel quite safe from the malediction of the dove-woman. But it was probably better she had not been there to pronounce her verdict: "The boy cannot be blamed. He is under seven, below the age of sin"; or "Sickness is the seventh human endeavor. It should teach judgement and meditation, not bad temper. How petty people have grown nowadays!" Those mysterious "sevens" of hers would have complicated things even further. Much of what she said was incomprehensible to Dushan and frightened him with its cold precision and dryness. However purifying her dour wisdom, however it protected the family, it oppressed them all with its fatalism. It contained the deep core of life, but not the flesh—the passions, follies, errors, carelessness, and gaiety that make the wholeness of life.

"She wished for me to find myself in a strange city, where people eat things I wouldn't like," Dushan thought as he was falling asleep, quieting himself with this solution he had hit upon. "Everyone will be expecting me to be scared, to waste away and die. When I arrive I ought to tell them right away not to get their hopes up: 'Hear ye, hear ye! I, Dushan Temuri, do not like to eat at all. I take an hour to finish my breakfast, and two for lunch. At supper it makes everyone crazy to see how slowly I raise my spoon to my mouth. Finally Father breaks down and chases me away from the table.' " And so the desire to make fun of the neighbor woman's words ended in a soothing self-parody. The long, intricate thought of how he would come to the strange city and make his announcement at the station did not form itself all at once; he built it word by word, embellishing it with feelings and excitement. In his imagination he saw a station and a crowd carrying plates with some inedible mass in them (he had heard that elsewhere seaweed, sausages of horseflesh, and oysters were eaten).

How cleverly, how skilfully he had assembled his idea! But

sometimes when he tried to write just a few words in his question-book there would be an uproar. Mother would be displeased, or even cry: "He starts school in only forty days!" What was the need for it all, the studying, the getting up in the morning to go off somewhere? Among the questions that had troubled him of late: "What are toads for?" He had spelled those words right—good boy. "To eat mosquitoes." And then: "What are mosquitoes for?" That was well written too, he was learning. But Mother was perplexed. It would be cruel to write, "For toads to eat." She wanted to find some value in the mosquito itself, apart from being toad-food. Father's handwriting: "It seems the usefulness of the mosquito is to carry pollen on its feet from one lotus blossom to another, marrying them." So: with a bit of invention the useful could be raised to the level of beauty. It really was pretty—the mosquito flying from the father lotus to the mother lotus, bringing pollen. "What are golde fish for?" Ugh, that was awful: "What are goldfish for?" "For nothing. They just eat and swim around." Strange, there were things that had no purpose. Amon's answer: "For bigger fish to eat. But they don't let them into the tank."

"Perhaps the goldfish helps to purify the water"—that was Father, thinking aloud. "No, it doesn't purify anything," Grandmother countered. "It is simply a beautiful creature, to gladden the heart." It was always that way. One look at the ugly toad and you saw its usefulness. But it took longer with beauty—you couldn't see at once. And what good could a flower be? It was not food for fish, or cows, or mosquitoes, or toads. Why plant something that could not be eaten? "It would be mean to plant flowers to feed toads."

"Look how well he wrote that! We ought to save it, put it in the music box with the family treasures." There were no bounds to the joy of the grownups, but he felt as if he had been caught doing something forbidden. In fact, he had broken all the rules—to copy blindly, letter by letter, what Mother had written out for him ("Don't let your attention wander. And don't make things up.")—and everything had turned out wonderfully: his parents were happy, and the flowers, he secretly hoped, were saved.

The seven human endeavors of which Grandmother had spoken: birth, manhood, work, marriage, fatherhood, war, and sickness. Life moved along from one to the next. Passing with dignity through them, a person lived out his unique destiny. Death, going away, was an endeavor too, but a secret one which could not be mapped out—perhaps because it was difficult to separate it from birth. Birth was the beginning of the transformation leading to a new birth. Butterflies and trees carried that inside them as memory. “A person should be able to leave life serenely. The person who fears death is one who has squandered his soul in vanities. It hurls itself against every window, cannot find its way home,” Grandmother said, speaking quietly to the tiny old woman, dressed all in black, who often came to visit her now. The woman had strange, green eyes, and everyone called her “Tutamullo-i-chashmikabut.”* It was her job, Dushan knew, to visit everyone who was old and sick, comforting them and preparing them for death. Although she herself needed comfort no less than they: she had lived eighty-two years already. Perhaps she, who was so stoical and patient in the face of others’ old age, was frightened by her own, and the words she found for others seemed insincere and unconvincing when she thought them to herself. Did the green-eyed woman secretly receive a teacher herself, one more wise and long-suffering than she? And did that teacher, in turn, take comfort from another? Did such hours of consolation tie all the living together in a single fate?

It seemed Grandmother was not in need of solace. She had thought everything over in the long years of her life and come to understand. Now she sat calm-faced opposite the green-eyed woman and said nothing.

They would often sit like that—not speaking a word, not even drinking tea. Maybe they were afraid the clatter of the cups would scare away the strange atmosphere that condensed around their withdrawn, aloof figures. Their silence, which seemed to convey so much, would continue for an hour or even two. Just before parting they would exchange brief courtesies

* The green-eyed preceptress.

and good wishes, as they had on meeting.

Dushan was puzzled. Could Grandmother and the green-eyed woman really communicate everything merely by sitting wordlessly together? Or perhaps when old age had made people taciturn they invented their own "bird language," to keep others from hearing what was meant to be a secret between the one who would soon go away and her teacher. He could see by the way they parted at the gate that although they had not pronounced a single word during their hour's visit they had talked over many things and now were saying goodbye until the next time, pleased that no one else in the house had understood anything of their conversation.

Dushan even thought that perhaps long ago the green-eyed woman had been a bee, or a crow. She had left the world to return in human form, and at the moment she was born the sun looked into her eyes from the wrong angle and turned them green. It might be that in the hours they seemed to be sitting silently the woman was telling Grandmother in the "bird language" about everything she had lived through in her changed shape, and what it was necessary to do after death, how to behave so as to be born well-favored—as a lotus with a graceful flower or a dove with smoke-blue wings. The green-eyed one herself had been remiss, overlooked some important requirement, and as a punishment had been born a stranger among a dark-haired and dark-eyed people. Everyone pointed at her, and stared at her eyes.

Probably as they stared into those green eyes people wondered the same thing Dushan did: Why did people who resembled one another in the color of their faces and in their speech, in their clothing and their living arrangements, all live in one place? Did they become alike from their proximity, or were newcomers admitted only when the older settlers saw they were like everyone else? Surely it was safer and more comfortable among one's own kind. You understood the questions they asked and could answer, and you were accustomed to the food, which always makes it taste better. If you put on a fez they would take you for a bandit, Jevat the Turk, and try to capture you. Or if you appeared like the black man who came in the hour before sleep,

wearing a hat with a curling brim and carrying a cane, they would tug at your sleeve and shout, "Where is the elephant? Show me!" thinking you were with a circus. One of the neighbors had lived for many years in Japan—they called him "Japanese Maruf." To show he was still a Bukharan at heart he would say: "Our people are intelligent, quick to understand—every bit as good as the Japanese. But we brew green tea a different way..." Dushan knew already that the nearest foreign country was Afghanistan. "Your great-grandfather is buried in Afghanistan," they told him. The hottest wind, the one that made the mulberry leaves drop off, like a frost, was called the Afghan wind. The skin on Grandmother's leg was corroded by a sore, an Afghan boil. He heard rumors: "The harvest will be poor this year. They say the locusts will come from Afghanistan."

"Why did great-grandfather go to Afghanistan?"

"He was an ambassador."

"Did he ride a horse and beat people with a whip?"

"What an idea! Why should he want to beat people? You have no family pride."

Of course Grandmother was angered by his impious attitude towards his illustrious forebears. Once when she was telling him about his grandfather, the judge, Dushan had actually asked: "Did he take bribes?"

No, he did not want to think evil of his great-grandfather. But when he heard of this ambassador being sent to an Afghan city it helped him express something he had felt: No one could be as arrogant as a Bukharan, as suave in flattery, as full of guile. That was why they spoke of "Afghan locusts", and "Afghan boils", and the "Afghan black death"—dying of thirst in the desert. That was why they looked down on the Uzbek boys.

"You mustn't let anyone know you have such ideas," Grandmother warned. "They might think you despise your own people. Even as it is they think there's something queer about you."

The "Afghan black death" impressed him most. In his hours of sleeplessness he was frightened by a clear vision of the sands and felt the burning heat of that bleak whiteness without a speck of

shade. He was afraid of other elemental forces too. The sea, with no land to be seen on any side, only the water sloshing and foaming all the way down to the murky depths where there was nothing to breathe. And heights: "What if I'm way up on top of a mountain and can't get down?"

"Why worry about something that could never be?"

"But what if it happened somehow?"

Where were these terrors from, these vivid imaginings, when the boy had never seen the ocean or climbed a mountain? Had someone in their family been to sea, had someone nearly perished of thirst in the desert? Perhaps these things had been passed along to him as a memory, suffered by his kin before he was born. Even in the first days of his life, as a baby, he had lived in memories of his own past and the more distant one of his ancestors.

Time, gathering into itself all these troubles, was moving imperceptibly towards the day when he would be seven. He himself thought seldom of the event, the pleasant hubbub and the presents, the kisses of his relations—Grandfather would come from the country for the occasion. He noticed, though, that his mother and grandmother thought and spoke a great deal about his "second age". It was believed life began in earnest at seven. The time up to then was a sort of practice: mistakes, foolishness, anger, and sins were generously forgiven, although it was believed too that much in the second age of life depended on the way a person looked at the world from the very day of his birth and on how the world received him. But when person reached seven he heard some inner warning signal, and a dispassionate recording of everything, the good and the bad, was begun.

"I shall have to learn my secret name now," Dushan thought when the bustle of the day was over, the good wishes and the tedious lectures. ("From now on you are a grownup. You understand everything, and you will answer for everything.") Probably that name was another responsibility of his second age: if it were stolen he would have to bear the consequence, the mortal loneliness.

On that day he had recalled every insult and injury he had

received, those of yesterday and of long ago. He had been mocked for his stolid, haughty expression, for the cold and indifferent gaze he often turned on everyone. Suddenly he saw himself as the others must—tedious and pathetic. It was as if the owner of the secret name had risen from the bed, leaving the person everyone knew as Dushan lying there. He looked down on Dushan intently, seeing everything, and whispered, "You bore me."

It must be at such moments, when a person has become tiresome to himself and those around him, that he changes his name, and the secret name renews him. That was why snakes shed so often, leaving dry, white skins behind in trees and on rooftops. Crawling about everywhere seeking to inflict its venom, the snake comes to be known in its old guise, and its harmful intentions are understood. Its wicked thoughts betray themselves in black spots on its body. The skin grows stiff and uncomfortable, like old clothing, and everyone recognizes the evil-doer and shouts, "Kill the snake!" Unmasked, the villain slinks off into its hole, there in darkness to take a new name. The snake wriggles backwards out of the old skin, all the while repeating the new name like an incantation. Finally it catches up to its own tail. It was as if the snake wanted to show that in taking a new name it was not at all repudiating the old: the single name simply had two meanings, the comprehensible and accustomed one when read from the beginning, and a secret one when read from the end. Dushan—Nashud.

He nearly shouted aloud from surprise when he realized that his name spelled backwards—Nashud*—had a meaning, and of the very sort a secret name should have. It would be rash and foolish to take a secret name whose beauty, fine sound, and significance would make it desired by all, like Babur, Firdousi, Saadi, or Amir-Temur.** Everybody would want to steal such a name and give it to their children. To shield yourself by taking the name of the Imperfect, the Failed—how wily that was! Who would want to be called such a humiliating,

* *Nashud*—imperfect, failed.

** Names of great poets and conquerors.

unattractive thing? To say "I am imperfect" was the same as saying "I am misshapen".

Already he wanted to begin the next day, the first of his second age, under this odd and shocking new name. Then he remembered what Grandmother had said: a person did not know his own secret name. Now this idea would not let him sleep. How could a person not know a name that belonged to him? Who knew it for him, then? Some stranger, who would carelessly reveal it to his neighbor? Perhaps he himself knew a dozen secret names, whose true owners did not know themselves by any name other than the one they had tired of, which everyone knew. Perhaps to know someone's secret name meant to know him in a completely different way—as less good and handsome than he imagined himself. Perhaps the simple trick of reading your name backwards was enough to bring you to your senses, to show you how imperfect you were.

This was his double, the one who had risen from the bed and was looking down on dull and unsociable Dushan—a being born from the sound of that name pronounced backwards. He could not be fooled, he knew everything. However good Dushan was, however he pretended, the double was the spirit of irony and contradiction. ("What's got into you? What makes you so contrary?") He would tell stories about the likes of Dushan: "Once there was a miserable, baldheaded fellow..." Fearing the ironic double, hoping to appease him, Dushan resorted to flattery, thinking the other could be taken in: "Once there was a kind, handsome boy..." The story about the foolish master and his wise servant—that was probably a story about one person. Once he had been displeased by something in himself. Maybe the servant was too cramped inside the master, and the master was too hungry in the servant. So they separated, and each lived by his own lights, doing as he pleased. In the end the master drove the servant inside again, and they lived happily ever after.

When they were separate it was too obvious that wisdom makes light of poverty, and folly spoils wealth. Probably it could not be that one and the same person was rich, and wise, and healthy, with rosy cheeks and a pleasing smile, and his

only trouble his thirty-second tooth, clear in the back, which scratched his gum the tiniest bit. It was hard to understand, though, how a wise man could be so poor, and how a fool got to be rich.

"Did I use to live inside Amon?" Dushan wondered. Everybody said the brothers were so different, not at all alike, but Dushan often felt the lack of Amon's liveliness. Amon was always at ease, with boys and girls alike. Girls—those creatures like bright butterflies, like flowers. They flocked around Amon, surrounding him with their beauty and gracefulness. They sensed that he was strong and generous. But in Dushan's presence they would frown, as if his impassive expression and lack of playfulness made them uncomfortable. However much he wished for them to be gentle and flirtatious with him too (he was Amon's own brother, after all, and ought to have some of his attractions—the shape of the eyes or the long arms) it was all in vain. Only the palest, quietest girls took any notice of him, the ones who were often ill. No sooner would it seem to him that a girl—that shy one, always so clean in her dull-colored dress—was admiring him secretly, giving him strength and confidence, than she would disappear from beside her gate, down with the chicken pox or the Afghan fever.

Amon brought cheerfulness into the family. He was the one who wore new clothes. Mother would try some blazing red shirt on him—his favorite color—and hop up and down, exclaiming with excitement. She and Grandmother would fuss over him, straightening his collar and patting down his hair: It was pure pleasure to give him new clothes—everything fit him so well! Dushan got the hand-me-downs.

He thought: "By making me wear Amon's old trousers and shoes are they trying to force me back into him so that I will be a little more carefree and agreeable?" He was so uncomfortable in his brother's cast-off sandals. When they were still new they had run for a long time through the dust of the street and over the flags of the courtyard before they got used to Amon's steps. By the time they came to Dushan they were tired out, hardened into their accustomed bumps and wrinkles. It was like a punishment, being made to wear a sweater that

had been stretched by Amon's shoulders, that felt cozy covering his chest. Dushan was ashamed of the figure he cut in that rascally sweater; there was something about him it didn't like—his long, thin neck, or his slow-moving arms with their love of ease.

It seemed as if Amon's cheerful, lively spirit settled into the folds of his clothes and sandals and lingered there. Dushan's parents meant well in trying to "drive him back" into Amon: they wanted him to be carefree and natural.

Having passed through the first age, Dushan was eager to put it behind him. He liked to entertain the company in the vacant lot with stories about himself at five or six: "Once Joseph was given a coin and fell asleep with it clutched in his palm. When he woke up he started screaming: 'Who stole my coin? Who took it?' Everyone searched—under the bed, under the table. He searched with the rest, bawling, never unclenching his hand. They would have looked all day, but finally his father thought to look in a place no one had checked—Joseph's little fist. There was the coin, right where it was when he fell asleep."

"Once in the winter when Joseph was on his way home from the store he had to go pee-pee. He told his brother, 'Hold this bag for me. I'll just be a moment.' It was windy, snowing. Joseph went around the corner and was just unbuttoning his fly when suddenly he fell into a pit. His brother waited for him in the cold for a long time, and finally started to look for him. He hadn't seen Joseph fall through the snow. After a while he started to eat the warm bread from the bag..."

"Once Joseph was licked by the calf-beetle in his sleep. When he woke up his face was all puffy, you couldn't see his eyes, and he wandered around crying, asking everyone in the family, 'Have you seen Joseph? He's lost.' "

All of that had happened to him: the coin clutched in his fist, the snow-covered pit, his own unrecognized face, and many other things he now made jokes of. He wanted to shake them off, like a needless and onerous experience. He called himself Joseph so the others would not notice he was copying Amon. He tried to walk carelessly, to strike up conversations with girls, speaking quickly and confidently. But the effect was

awkward and comical, and everyone laughed good-naturedly at the little imam. He would have to flee in disgrace, to take refuge in Grandmother's hugs and her quiet, soothing song:

*How long ago it all was! So long ago!
I have forgot the color of the blossom.
Was it red, or blue, or white? I can't recall it.
What is the color of the almond blossom?
But I remember the magic smell in the springtime:
Unforgettable fragrance—desires, days of my youth!
What color was the blossom? How can I recall it?
If only our memories of far-off days were colored!
The perfume is all I remember...
Oh, the lovely flower of the almond!*

He understood: people looked at the past in different ways. In the fullness of life, with his child's innocence, he saw the future stretched out before him bright and longed-for, and glanced around ironically at his past. Grandmother looked back sadly, "I have forgot... I can't recall..." She had lived through all of it and lost the best. Once, though, he was startled by an unexpected thought: What would become of the things he lived through in this second age, the age of manhood, which had admitted him to itself? What would happen to him in the third age, when he took up his life's work? This delirious excitement with which he and Amon prepared for their long-awaited trip to the country—what would it be like when he looked back on it? He was in such a hurry to be off that he had not even said goodbye properly to his family, had forgotten to wake Grandmother even though she had asked him. She had waited anxiously with them, but at noontime was unable to hold out any more and went to sleep as always in the summer room. She whispered to him: "I'm just going to close my eyes for a little while." He looked into her pale, composed face, at the beads of sweat around her eyes. He had wanted to wake her, but then he thought how she would spend a long time kissing him—he was making his first long trip away from home. He left her sleeping and ran out to the gate.

Dushan had expected that now, through the car windows, he would at last see the whole length of the big street that their dead-end emptied into. Then he would ride through other streets, through the whole city: amazing views of unfamiliar places and people who did not know—How strange!—where the two brothers were being taken. A boy he knew would stand back against the hot, white wall to let the car by. He would glance into their happy faces and understand, and for a long time look enviously after them. They were leaving the stifling, narrow alleyways for the open spaces, the trees, flowers, and butterflies. But nothing of the kind happened. The car traveled a little ways down the big street and turned sharply to the right. The brothers saw the familiar vacant lot and shouted to the boys under the mulberries—too bad, they didn't hear. Then in a cloud of dust the car emerged onto the highroad. With a jolt of surprise Dushan understood that the city was behind them, although they had gone only a little ways from the house. The realization upset him, and he hung his head to think over what he had seen. But his country grandfather poked him in the ribs and laughed loudly: he was glad the car was no longer jolting over the stones of the street, tilting from side to side in narrow passages between walls, but traveling now along a straight, smooth road.

Grandfather hugged the two of them and clapped them on the shoulders. He kept asking Dushan, “Is it really true this will be your first visit to us?” And was surprised at the answer. He simply could not believe it was Dushan’s first visit. He looked sternly at his grandson, as if he might catch him in a lie, but then hugged him as if he had suddenly felt sorry for the boy. “Oh, the times we live in! Relatives visiting each other once in a hundred years!” And for some reason he laughed at his complaint. Dushan looked at him curiously: Grandfather was grumbling, going on about his “good old days,” but not at all like Grandmother did. He diluted his regret and bitterness with delight and high spirits. “In my day no one had ever heard of alimony!” He pulled some papers out of two pockets. Apparently he had visited some dull office in the city; that was why he had been so late in coming for them. “It’s all right. I know

a thing or two myself. I've seen a little of the world. At one time I even had occasion to mingle with polite society in search of a life's companion." And the surprising thing he had learned: "You know, young men, ladies from polite society are so gracious that you can't tell if they're inviting you to court them or if it's just their upbringing, and they're not thinking anything of the kind."

Of the two "young men" only Amon joined in the chaffing and good cheer. Dushan was silent. He was disappointed at not having gone through the city. It seemed to him that part of the world, from the house and the vacant lot to this highway, had slipped away unseen and unfelt—its shapes, light, smells, and faces—and the loss pained him. He had thought everything in the world around him would be known and comprehended step by step, day by day: first the courtyard, then the entire house and the street where it stood, the vacant lot and the mulberries. And this coming to know, without omitted spaces or streets, would present itself to him in a single, continuous picture with no mysteries or disturbing secrets, a simple and intelligible canvas. He had long awaited this day when he would leave the familiar atmosphere of the courtyard and the street and travel through the city's unknown places. He had fretted that there would not be time to look everything over and feel it properly, and the journey would leave him dismal and uneasy: the uncomprehended and unfelt places, the streets he would never return to, never travel down again—all of it would remain alien, strange, and disturbing. He would always sense that somewhere outside the world that had accepted him, that he had taken in, was another to which he had not been admitted. They had teased his hopes: "Wait till you're older. Next summer you can play over by where the mosque is." He had waited, worried, wanted—and now they had cheated him.

He glanced at an even row of oddly-shaped little hills—the white ruins of a fortress—and felt nothing. Disappointed, he thought only that their courtyard was probably always unsure of its defenses, and so the city had put up these walls to protect it. Here beyond was the low (no higher than the treetops), free, and open world of the country, where according to Grand-

father no locks hung on the gates. Country people knew that when the time came they would lose everything at once; it was only city-dwellers who took foolish comfort in stout walls and fortifications, thinking it more prudent to lose a little at a time.

Dushan kept looking at his grandfather: How would it be living with him? Would he feel at home? Dushan hardly knew his country grandfather at all, but he sensed he would tire quickly from this noisy good cheer. Would he be gruff? Would he turn against his grandson? He would take the place of both Grandmother and Father now. Perhaps the disquieting thing was the way he spoke Tajik, clumsily, heedlessly, as if mocking Grandmother's language for her constant, "When will you finally learn to speak Tajik? There are children growing up in the house." It would be terrible if Grandfather took a dislike to him for some reason, if he began to scowl and refused to speak to his grandson. What would Dushan do then? Amon would be on grandfather's side, of course. Dushan would get up early in the morning and walk back home along this road. It would be dusty and hot. People riding by in their cars, seeing the solitary, neatly dressed city boy, would shout to him, ask what the matter was. But the little imam, imperturbable as always, would keep right on without any hint of weakness or fatigue. He would not even unbutton the collar of his white shirt or remove the carefully folded handkerchief from his breast pocket. The most important thing was a feeling of self-reliance.

The sense of being taken away from home was so strong, and Dushan was now so agitated, that he even pictured himself, offended, heading back to the city under the glaring sun. When he looked at this image from the side, out of the car window, he suddenly realized that everything he saw around him—the trees along the road, the green, still-unharvested fields and the yellow ones, already bare, with flocks of birds—had long been known to him. It was as if he were seeing it all for the second or third time: these same trees and the low fields, lower than the road. That was why he was not exhilarated, why he did not lean out the window, like Amon, each time he saw a lone colt timidly sniffing at the dust of the highway or a goat embracing a

mulberry tree, jaws working, devouring the leaves.

His own indifference and the tranquil, familiar scenery calmed him, and his mood brightened. There was nothing so bad in not having seen the part of the city he thought they would go through. The places he had known and understood—the little courtyard, the dead-end between the big street and the vacant lot—were enough to satisfy his curiosity about the world. And what he was not destined to see would remain behind, remarkably like what he did see, like this road.

That was probably why Dushan felt no surprise when they arrived at his grandfather's house without passing through the village, as he had imagined. They turned off the highway, and Amon gave a shout—he had recognized the house. There was the smell of a cool stream. The car climbed up onto a bridge, and the house came into view at the edge of a field. Behind it were the dark thickets about whose strange denizens Grandfather had whispered so many frightening things. (Grandmother: "That's enough stories about demons and such! Don't make pagans of the children.") Alongside the house was a peaceful apricot orchard. Here was a surprising coincidence: both this house and the one in the city stood not at the center of things, beside the main square, but on the distant outskirts. It seemed to be inscribed in the fate of their family that they would build their dwellings in quiet, unpeopled spots beside scrubby, vacant tracts of land. Dushan felt perfectly at home now—there was so much that was familiar, reassuring. He wanted to jump out of the car and run around the house, its warm, welcoming walls and gates, which in their likeness to those of his city home had accepted him long ago, before ever having seen him.

He looked at Grandfather again, as if asking, "Is it all really true? Really?" As if had he detected a crafty smile on Grandfather's face or heard him say, "I was only fooling" he would have felt cheated for the rest of his life. Why was it so important to him now that it be true—the story about the demon with the little book who lived in the thickets? Grandmother had been angry: "It's all just a fairy tale, a pagan legend." Dushan believed her and was comforted. Why should he care about such things? Somewhere in the country, not far from

Grandfather's house, a demon woman sat in a hollow nut tree combing her hair. She had taken out her monstrously long green breasts and hidden them in the grass, waiting for someone passing through the thickets, whose fate was written in her little book, to stumble over them and fall. He would be her servant then, in bondage to her forever. Was it this dark thing that had drawn Dushan here? Was it not for this he had come, without even admitting it to himself?

And Grandfather seemed to have guessed his thoughts. When they got out of the car he said:

"Everything I told you about the thickets was the truth."

"Really? But how do you know?"

"Not even the angels know the things we old men do. We're home! Welcome!"

The brothers were beside themselves with excitement, and Grandfather indulged them: they had scarcely piled out of the car beside the gate when he nodded towards the thickets and said, "I know you can't wait." Unlike Grandmother, always laying down prohibitions, Grandfather allowed everything. He said slyly:

"My method of education is to remove restrictions. You're on your own! Complete freedom! Although in fact it's the same thing—to forbid or to permit. Your grandmother's forbidding is good for the soul, my permitting is good for the body. Let the juices flow!"

Dushan looked at him in irritation. He was talking like Grandmother now, with her tiresome moralizing. Dushan knew it was despicable to think of Grandmother as a burden—it was just that he had discovered something new in his country grandfather, something very touching and dear to him, and it had come between him and Grandmother.

Still burning with shame at these thoughts, Dushan stared at the woman who had come out to meet them. He generously presented his forehead to be kissed. Finally he remembered. He had seen her once at their house in the city. Mother had said, "This is your aunt. Your father's sister." He looked at the woman, but no sense of kinship stirred in him. Still he did not run after Amon to the thickets. He stood beside her for a little

while, not wanting to hurt her feelings. It was so awkward: she was a relation, a part of his own family, but there was no warmth. Although she probably felt love for him, a child and a guest who brought a joyful bustle to the house. So as not to wound her with his unresponsiveness he smiled and said: "Everyone at home is fine. Mother says you should come and visit us. We are all so fond of you." Then he went after Amon, remembering Grandfather's words: "All the interesting things happen in the thickets after midnight. In the daytime it's just empty and dull in there."

The very looks of the place were foreboding: an even wall of monotonous green on every side, broken only by a little hill of white sand overgrown with scrubby trees. Why had this spot been left untouched? Why hadn't they leveled the hill and planted crops here? Fear? Superstition? Whatever the reason, the thickets were a natural site for thrilling adventures and eerie happenings. A somnolent, night-time aura hung over everything. Only here could such uncanny, inconceivable things happen: Once a groom was going past the thickets and decided to rest for a while in the cool shade. He fell asleep, and when he crawled out again his eyes were closed and he kept neighing like a horse. Then he went up onto the bridge and threw himself into the water.

Dushan heard that story as he sat a little to one side of a group of village boys. They had immediately accepted Amon into their midst; it was amazing how easily he chatted with them in Uzbek.

"Whose father was that groom?"

"They say he came from the next village. Here's how he neighed." And three of the boys, down on all fours, repeated the strange behavior of the groom after he was turned into a horse. Amon jumped up and ran after them, trying to mount on their backs. Dushan laughed with the rest, then went over to the other boys and sat down quietly.

"They say a foal was born in that groom's stable with a white spot on his side. He grew up high-strung, wouldn't let anyone close to him—like a wild horse. Finally the groom got mad and burned him with a branding iron right in the middle

of that while spot. He drowned the next day."

"What about the colt?"

"They never found him. They looked out in the steppe, too."

The atmosphere was unaccustomed, disturbing: these short conversations, the thick air, the singing of a bird (odd at such an hour). It seemed to Dushan that where Uzbek was spoken unknown things might happen, like in the story of the colt and the groom. Only where Uzbek was the language did such boys exist, and these thickets, and Grandfather's house, and the way that bird sang, with a little rest after every repetition of the brief tune. Every language needed its own world to express. Tajik needed their house in the city, and the oleander, and the street ending in the vacant lot with its mulberries. If he were to speak now in Tajik the very spirit of the language would be frightened by the unfamiliar setting, by its own inability to name the things it saw. And so he sat silently, afraid to say anything.

The village boys evidently understood his predicament, and tried not to bother him with their questions about life in the city: about trucks so wide they scraped the walls along the streets, about circus dogs, about fruit-drops in red boxes, about school desks that opened up, about Ideal, the paste that could wipe away ink, about blue sports shoes, about mint-flavored chewing gum, and about the pen that wrote in five colors. Amon told them about these things, and Dushan, listening to their half-whispers, feeling the trust and warmth all about him, was surprised once again by that rare and happy sensation, that acute awareness of self and surroundings, which comes only in the deeply personal age of mischief and daydreams.

Grandfather came to call them to supper at the worst possible moment, when it had just been decided to take the brothers into the depths of the thickets. They shouted and waved him away impatiently, but he insisted: People ate supper and went to bed early in the country, and the two visitors from the city would have to keep the same hours. The boys turned away and whispered among themselves. They agreed to meet in the same spot early the next morning to investigate the night-time doings of the woman who lived in the hollow nut tree. The victim she

pulled up to her hair tangled in her green hair would naturally leave tracks on the grass. The boys would follow the tracks and find the nut tree.

As they walked home Dushan kept thinking about the dreadful things he would see the next day. He fell behind and stumbled over some dark bush. Grandfather and Amon waited for him patiently. It made Dushan glad to see his brother so gentle and thoughtful. He had been that way since the moment they got into the car. Perhaps Amon was dazzled by all the new and beautiful things around him, and his heart was softened by the joy and eagerness with which he looked at everything.

But Grandfather surprised Dushan. He stood watching the whole time his grandson came slowly up the path, picking the thorns of the dark bush out of his sleeves.

"I've been watching you for a long while in town and now here. There's something in your character doesn't want to walk where everyone else does. We were going along the path, but you felt drawn over to one side, into that briar-bush. Yes, it's part of your nature. You won't have an easy life of it."

"He's always that way," confirmed Amon. "He feels crowded walking beside someone in the street. Has to go wandering off somewhere."

"That inscrutable grandfather of yours," Grandmother called him. So it was not only Dushan who wanted to understand his grandfather he in turn was watching the boy's every step. Dushan was even more surprised when Amon pounced on a round, striped stone, thinking it was a half-hidden turtle. He came back shamefaced, and Grandfather said:

"Silly boy. A stone that looks like a turtle is more interesting. You should have picked it up, taken it back to the city with you." And he explained that the whole fascination of the stone was the desire inside it, tormenting it, forcing it to pretend. To resemble a creature with a different, although similar, form required an effort, a readiness even to burst the delicate threads inside and spill a drop of blood had they noticed the red along the cracks in the stone? How the stone had trembled when Amon ran to seize it, and how heavy and bitter its disappointment when the counterfeit was discovered! A turtle was less

interesting. In fact you might say it was not interesting at all. In its complacency it had long since forgotten the time when it too was a stone, pretending. Nothing tormented it any more: no desire to change its shape, pattern, and color and be like some more complicated being, no readiness to sacrifice even a drop of blood. In a word, all that had not yet become, that longed to become, was rich and interesting, and all that had become, and was content, was poor and dull. Any part of nature that was tired, and no longer wished to change its form, would decay from within: the shell would turn back to stone, falling again into its original state.

“Strange,” thought Dushan. “So a wall that wants to be a house is better than a real house, and a village disguising itself as a city is more interesting than a city, and a dog that pretends to jump higher than its trainer is richer than he is.”

And he, with his curious habit of never following the path, the smooth road, in the footsteps of his elders or at their side, his way of walking at the edge, beside the pits, through the bushes, in places that drew him irresistibly and where one false step could mean to fall, to hurt himself—was not he, in his desire to shun the familiar, the tedious, the commonplace, to walk where the sensible and cautious Amon would never tread—was not he somehow like the stone that pretended?

Probably stones with an inner longing, with an assumed coloration, were hidden everywhere. There were roots that looked like chicken legs and bits of glass feigning to be dewdrops, copper balls skilfully mimicking coins and flowers trembling like butterflies. All of them resembled people in something, and each person found his own double among them. Someone who came across a round stone with holes like eyes might hang it around his neck, passing a thread through one of the moist sockets. People sewed coins about their children’s pockets and braided blue beads into their hair. Was it done so that when the charm’s owner was exhausted or inattentive, or sound asleep, the double would keep misfortune away from him?

He wanted to go back for the talisman stone, but Grandfather hurried them on. Dushan noted the bush and the tree beside it so that the next day he could find the sweet sham again.

He was surprised to see his aunt by the gate once more, waiting for them, as if all the time the brothers sat beside the thickets she had not stirred. Perhaps she believed that by remaining on the spot where Dushan had injured her with his coldness she would overwhelm him with shame, and seeing her again beside the gate he would suddenly experience a tender feeling of kinship, a feeling that ought to be communicated by something more than her simple physical presence.

*Bridegroom, bridegroom fair of face,
The bride stands in a magic place.
Whoever takes a step aside
Will never, never make a bride.*

Dushan stopped, frightened. What could he do now? If he were not able to overcome his indifference, if he went uncaringly past his aunt and into the house, like Grandfather and Amon, how would he look at her afterwards? She seemed tired, worn out by something. What would he say to her? His worry made him so heartsick that he ran to her and threw his arms around her neck. And suddenly he smelled on her breast the quiet, familiar odor, like none other, which came only from his own flesh and blood—from Mother and Grandmother and Father. So bitter were his unknown losses, the secrets that darkened and tormented the lives of adults—and so comforting was this communion of belonging, like an oath to be faithful, to serve, to defend—that he broke down and cried.

Why had he never experienced this feeling when he hugged his father or grandmother? Why had he learned it from his aunt, whom he had seen just once, for a moment, and whom he knew hardly at all? Why had it been revealed to him here and now—this sympathy for all of their family, this joy in them, in Mother, too, and his inscrutable grandfather, and Amon? And all from the embrace of his aunt, standing in the “magic place” beside the gate. Perhaps the features of their kindred were drawn together more brightly and solidly in her than in the rest. He had needed to come here and feel her touch, like the touch of a magic wand, so that this sleeping feeling could be waked

and afterwards reach further, to those who were with him always at home. Maybe that was what Grandmother's parting words to him meant:

"Come back to us changed. Learn to love better in absence."

Grandfather's house startled him with its unfamiliarity. He expected everything inside to be like at home, since this was the home of a relation. He had felt no curiosity about this country house, thinking he would find it dull, long ago seen and comprehended. He had even been glad of this: he would not need to bother with getting to know the house, and all of his attention could go to Grandfather, whom he must understand and discover for himself, and to his aunt, whom he must learn to love.

But now he entered the house and saw that its courtyard was bare. The house was low and white, simple, in places even haphazard, as if it had been thrown up with no thought for the beauty of lines and walls. It lacked the scarcely noticeable touches of their house in the city, with its marble drains under the washbasins, its red balls set into all the corners of the courtyard (their color diffused when the light struck them, tinging the grayness of the walls), and its doors situated so their opening and closing would change the play of light and shadow (together with the shade of the grapevine, they created a charming effect on those rare May evenings when the wind carried the breath of plant life—they called it the green wind).

As he looked around at everything Dushan suddenly realized that such a house was best suited to his grandfather's temperament. It expressed his essence and way of life. There were two rooms, both of them airy for summer, with side walls almost entirely taken up by windows that opened onto the apricot orchard, of which the rooms seemed a natural extension. The orchard was so overgrown that it gently crowded the house, embracing it, leaning fruit-laden branches on its roof. Tree trunks touched the walls and in places entered them with their rough flanks, but modestly, harmlessly, as if an agreement existed between the orchard and the house: in two or three years the trees were to come into the rooms, to lean over the bed where Dushan had been put down.

He was sleeping on a strange bed for the first time, and although he was tired from all that the day had brought he lay awake far into the night. He kept thinking how the trees would enter the house and look around at everything inside—at the ceiling, at Grandfather's simple way of living. They would bend over the cradle where his aunt's baby lay and wave their branches in consolation. Then they would leave the house from the other side after shaking off their apricots in the courtyard and take their places in the vacant lot beside the gate. The whole house would be stained red. Dushan thought too of all he would see: the orchard in the daylight, and the thickets, and the threshing barn where the glum bullocks ground the stalks of grain in the choking heat. The new life would last for all of August, until Dushan returned to the old.

"Go to sleep now," Grandfather said. "Today doesn't count. Everything begins tomorrow." And he went into the next room, where his daughter's baby lay in his cradle. The infant had gazed at Dushan and stretched his whole body towards him, but then burst into tears—probably he was tired.

Dushan could hear his aunt and grandfather talking, at first quietly, thinking the boys were not asleep yet, then for some reason louder. Dushan smiled when he heard Grandfather's favorite phrase: "In my day no one had ever heard of alimony." This time he seemed angry at the intrusion of the outlandish, inhuman word: he pronounced it with a sneer and then laughed bitterly.

"We don't have to do this," he said to her afterwards. "Please—I'm begging you. Let's keep our dignity. Running from office to office, from lawyer to lawyer, all over some piddling trifles. It's all so paltry and disgusting. And that stinking lawyer, sitting there like he's running a tannery or some grand estate, when all he can do is squeeze out a measly alimony payment. Damn it, I won't have anything to do with it!"

"But why the drinking? What need was there for that?" his daughter asked meekly, and said no more.

"For courage—to face the lawyer," said Grandfather and laughed a sort of low, easy laugh. Listening to that sound mingle with the night whispers of the orchard, the drone of insects and

the thud of overripe fruit, which for some reason drops mostly after midnight, Dushan finally drifted off to sleep.

When he awoke it was as if the day before had never been. In the half-darkness he had not been able to get a good look at the orchard; he had not heard the end of the night's conversation. Everything was back at the starting point, like after a spoiled game or an argument ended by some new understanding. The orchard stood revealed, and already Amon was running barefoot through the grass. Their aunt was making breakfast for them; Grandfather was at the post office, telephoning the city to say that the travelers had arrived safely.

Dushan sat on the threshold and watched his brother jumping up and down to snatch apricots from the trees. Amon's hands and face were red from the juice and his feet were green. He was a red-and-green imp, mad with delight.

Dushan had not slept well and he felt ill, shivery. Rested, and with his usual self-possession, he certainly would not have surrendered to his brother's mood, but now it was as if he had been driven into Amon. He hurtled into the orchard with a shout. Together the two boys raced between the trees in a rage of joy, sliding on the grass and fallen leaves, the juices of crushed fruit squirting into their faces.

It was as if Amon, having thought so much about the hour when the boys would gather in the thickets to pay a call on the woman who lived in the nut tree, had himself embodied the soul of a demon, and Dushan had become his own brother. Still in a frenzy, he ran back into the room. Suddenly he remembered the swift's nest that hung from the ceiling like an inverted clay cup. He grabbed Grandfather's cap and began to throw it up at the nest. The swift peeked out in surprise and quickly hid again. Then the head emerged once more, and the bird fluttered out terrified. It flew over the bed and the mirror, above the table where the vase stood. Dushan went on tossing the cap. He wanted to chase the swift out into the orchard, into the open air. But the bird seemed not to understand what he wanted and continued to dart about the room.

"Out with you...out I say!" he shouted. He charged around

the room making such a noise that the frantic bird flew at full speed into the wall and began to plummet. Just above the glass vase it caught itself and tried to fly back up to its nest. At that moment the cap hit its mark at last. Astounding: the nimble, fleet-winged creature tumbled lightly and silently to the floor, a lifeless bird of paper.

Dushan looked aghast at the swift, which lay motionless with its wings folded across its body. At first he could not understand what had happened. Then he noticed how the dark-brown body was fading and the color from the head was sinking downwards along the breast, as if the bird were newly painted and the damp surface were drying before his eyes. He rushed back outside in an uproar of emotion. Instead of repentance a silly, wanton idea came to him: That was why birds washed in the morning as soon as they awoke and began to twitter—they were spreading life over themselves like beauty, putting on a fresh coat of color. When people washed up after sleeping they too felt themselves alive. The dead were washed by others. But the water did not give them life, unless perhaps it came from a magic well.

Fearful that his grandfather or aunt—the guardians of the house—would discover the crime, Dushan went to his brother and told him everything. While Amon was examining the dead bird curiously, turning it over and lifting it by its tail, Dushan remembered what Grandmother had said about life after the seventh year: all of a person's good and evil deeds were recorded forever. This was his first wrongdoing—so horrible, so senseless. How had it happened? How could he have forgotten that in this new, second age of his life he would answer for everything, that he must be sober, kind, and generous?

Amon, seeing how upset his brother was, carried the swift out into the orchard to hide it under the leaves.

"Don't be afraid. If Grandfather asks what happened I'll say I killed it by accident. He will forgive me."

"It was you that did it," said Dushan abruptly.

"That's what I'll tell him. I won't give you away."

"You killed it," Dushan repeated solemnly.

Amon stared at him in disbelief. Instead of being glad, thankful, Dushan was angry, reproving—as if he seriously believed his brother was guilty.

“What’s the matter with you? You mean that I...”

“Yes. It was you who killed the swift,” said Dushan in the even, obstinate tone that always infuriated Amon. “I was sitting quietly and a demon possessed you. I ran after you and became the same as you. I always thought before that when I was seven and my second life began I would be like you and take your name. This morning I changed into you—it was Amon who did the killing.”

“You’re out of your head!” shouted Amon, taken aback by the bizarre notion. “Where do you get such ideas?” He said that in the voice Mother used when she was exasperated, and threw out his hands exactly as she would have.

“I’m not to blame,” said Dushan. “The deed will be recorded as yours. And now I will go out of you and live separately, the way I was born.” He turned and started back, expecting to be struck—there was no other way the whole thing could have ended.

“So I’m evil? I’m a devil?” Amon hit him from behind, knocking him to the grass, and kicked him again and again. “Get out of me, then! Get out—innocent! Saint!”

Dushan lay in a crumpled heap. He felt nothing: no pain, no resentment. When Amon ran back towards the house he lay motionless for a little while, savoring the relief that came after the blows. Guilt had departed. It was all so silly—it had not really been. Time had carried it away, together with vanity, fear, and pettiness. Everything was simple and untroublesome. He felt suddenly changed—stronger, more grown up.

“It’s stupid to change yourself into someone else, to make others suffer for your sins. It’s cruel,” thought Dushan.

Amon was sitting on the threshold where his brother had sat after waking up. He watched Dushan get to his feet, deliberate as always, as if nothing had happened, and brush off the grass and dirt that clung to him. As Dushan came towards the house Amon looked at his serious-ironic face and thought that

even if his brother were being murdered he would try to keep his clothes neat and clean. Amon smiled and said quickly:

“Let’s go to the thickets. They’ll be waiting for us.”

“What about breakfast?”

“We can say we filled up on apricots.”

As they hurried along the path, Dushan recognized the tree and the bush he had noted the day before, but could not see the talisman stone. He decided to come back alone and look for it. If he fell behind it would make his brother angry again. He must be considerate: Amon would feel hurt and forsaken now that Dushan had separated from him, freed himself after the transformation.

But they did not find the other boys beside the thickets only silence and heavy air. Amon whistled, but no one came out of the bushes. They sat down in the shade disappointed. What had happened? Could it be that the boys had gone without them to look at the fearful work of the demon woman? Maybe she had lifted someone up to her hiding place, intending to bake him in her oven, but then felt too lazy and left him to dry in the wind.

The silence was uncanny—not at all like that of the city in the hour when morning passed triumphantly into day. The birds and the butterflies, the rustling of the leaves and the grass, all joined in an uninterrupted hum, without distinct sounds, without melody, without rest. You could not make out the thump of falling fruit or the call of a bird, only the sublime silence. In the city all you heard were isolated sounds following pauses—the rumble of a motor or the clang of metal. Even voices could be heard in the distance. The silence there was profane, wearisome. Here in the country there was only a ringing in your ears: the sounds of the body tirelessly growing.

Wrapped in this silence, the brothers did not hear the car come along the road to the right of the thickets, did not hear their aunt calling to them.

They were surprised to see her in the car: Perhaps she had decided to take them for a ride. But when they ran to her the

face that met them was full of sorrow. "A terrible thing has happened," she said. "A terrible, terrible thing." They were shocked that she should grieve so over the dead swift.

They sat aloof in the car like two strangers, as if they had suddenly come to hate one another. Finally, as if realizing she ought to tell the boys why they were suddenly being taken away from the country, their aunt looked around at them and said simply: "Your grandmother has passed away." And it seemed to the brothers that merely by speaking those words she had shifted the weight of her bereavement onto them, and her own burden was eased.

Neither of them asked any questions. They were confused, stunned: it seemed their minds and hearts could not comprehend or accept the enormous, impossible thing they had heard "Grandmother has passed away."

While they grappled with what had taken place, their aunt told them how Grandfather had learned the appalling news at the post office when he called the city and had left right away, without even returning home. The woman who brought the letters had run to the house to tell her. But these details, which their nervously talkative aunt related so eagerly, only kept Dushan from concentrating.

He had never known the grief of losing someone near to him. The feeling seemed to tease him, entice him with its newness: How would it be? What would he feel? What did Grandmother feel? He caught himself hoping they would arrive in time for him to see it all, although he knew it would be frightening: curiosity was stronger than dread. The house intrigued him with what had happened there, but it was too bad, leaving the country he had not learned to know Grandfather, had not perfected his Uzbek, had not penetrated into the thickets, had not gone back for the pretending stone, had not swum in the stream, had not ridden the bullocks. Everything August had held out to him would remain behind in the country. He would never make another trip like this. The past would not return with its unfulfilled promises.

Dushan was still pondering these losses when they came to the city. From the far end of the street he saw a group of people

sitting on chairs beside the gate. As he went past them he heard someone say quietly to his aunt, "They've already taken her away." And he understood that what he had secretly believed, hoped all the way home, was a lie, a figment: That it was all a monstrous mistake, a silly trick. That Grandmother had only gone to sleep and not woken up at the usual time. That if they held a mirror to her lips they would see—it would fog over. He walked into the courtyard and looked around. He told himself: "I won't cry where strangers can see. I'll think about Grandmother when I'm alone."

The courtyard had changed. It had been forced to reveal itself to a crowd of outsiders that began to arrive in the early morning and continued to grow till the hour when Grandmother was carried away, strangers come to gaze upon what they had never seen: the bed, the oleander, the shutters of the summer room, all the cherished and intimate secrets of the family it had guarded within itself. All had now been divulged, and the very spirit of the place was alarmed. The courtyard stood gray, dreary, and dirty—like after that dust storm. Grandmother had called Dushan to the window: "Look what's happened. This is how it will be when I die."

So she had known just how the courtyard would look on the day of her death. Perhaps she had also known what would happen to the family afterwards. Had she believed she would not go away altogether, would change into a turtle-dove and return to look down from a tree branch at the family she had left?

Mother, dressed all in white, was dazed almost beyond grief. She sat with some women in the summer room while the green-eyed preceptress read to her from a little book. Dushan wanted to go to her, but Grandfather called the boys into another room and sat with them—Mother could not be with her sons today.

And for some reason at the very moment Grandfather took his hand to lead him away Dushan wilted, withdrew into himself. None of what was going on around him interested him any more—the tears he was holding back were too bitter.

He lay down for a little while, but that was unbearable. He got up. Grandfather sat in silence, hands on his knees, as if he were keeping watch over the boys. Dushan asked for something to eat, although he was not hungry. He thought how heartless it had been not to have said goodbye to Grandmother. He had left her sleeping in the summer room at noon time, had hurried joyfully away. The people in the courtyard said, "She died towards morning, at four o'clock." Then he remembered lying on the strange bed in Grandfather's house. He had heard a knocking at the gate, and through his uneasy sleep thought it was the wind—Grandmother! She had come to say farewell. But he did not get up, did not go out to the gate. Yes, that had been just before dawn.

These recollections did not upset him. He was so tired he did not even want to go and see whether Mother had come out into the courtyard at last, whether Father had returned from the funeral. He was isolated, indifferent to everything. It was a mood he had long known; Grandmother said once that out of it the soul was born.

The only thing that upset him was when they hung Grandmother's pillow from the grapevine at nightfall and placed a lighted candle and a saucer of sugared water beside the window in her room. The grownups explained it to him: When Grandmother's soul came to say goodbye to everyone it would go into the room and feel bitterness at not finding its body. It would fly about in the dark, blundering into the corners, until it saw the saucer in the candlelight. Then it would drink, and the bitterness would be forgotten. Grandmother's soul would touch the pillow one last time—the pillow that had cradled her head on the day of her birth and the day of her death. Then a moonbeam could reach down to take the soul away forever.

The evening would be still, windless. If a gust came up as the soul was ascending, the moonbeam might be bent, blown off course, and get stuck somewhere in the branches of a mulberry in the vacant lot. And then the soul would be reborn as a creature not quite perfect, a turtle-dove with a short wing or a

praying mantis lacking one leg.

Nothing could be more terrible than the gaze of that dove, which would come every morning to look reproachfully at all of them. At the moment the soul reached up they should have been waiting beside the trees to shake the branches and free the moonbeam. The living must see to every detail in the ceremony of departure; it was their duty, even if they would all sigh with relief when it was finally ended.

Probably Grandmother had known this too: the austerity and obedience in which she held them all was a burden to the family, and now that she was gone it would crumble inside. There would be more laughter and carefree moments, less wisdom and long-suffering, as if all the lessons she had taught them were forgotten at once.

But what would remain?

“What color was the blossom? How can I recall it?”

Could it be that all that would remain was the answer she wrote once in Dushan’s question-book? “What is a fool?”—“A fool is someone who walks quickly, speaks loudly, eats a lot, and is always looking at the ground hoping to find coins. He doesn’t put his hand over his mouth when he sneezes and goes on snoring even after others wake him and ask him to stop.”

So a wise person was someone who covered his mouth and sprayed himself, never slept because he was afraid he might snore, never picked up coins, went around whispering in people’s ears, walked slowly and was late for everything, ate next to nothing and wasted away...

Could that be all? Old age had been in him from the day of his birth, and Grandmother had carried part of his youth away with her, and a wise person was one who lapsed into folly sometimes, and the sick and quiet had just as much passion and health inside as others, and however his memory behaved, however it tried to forget, he would carry her old age in him, feeling it as a burden, but patiently and with dignity.

The heat did not last as long now—barely till the evening. The turtle-dove fell silent, and the dandelion blew off the roof.

The moon went higher up into the sky. September was coming,
the time for school and the choir of boys:

*Eat your meal, and we will sing for you.
The Kashgar rooster woke at dawn to sing,
Its loud voice crying roused your sleeping ear.
And now with evening we again are here.
See: moonlight soon will cover everything.
And once again we find you at your ease;
The good and noble surely will know peace.*



Book Two

NUMBERS AND DEGREES

I

Now it seemed to him he had been driven out of his former existence, torn away by force. He had no taste for anything, and his desires had lost their edge. He wanted to become a wanderer; in some unknown place his hunger for life would return to him. At least he would feel something. He would travel that same road along which Grandfather had taken him to the country and along which he had returned for Grandmother's funeral. He would lie down in the shade of a mulberry to chew on the dry fruit and suddenly see the two woodcutters: first their dusty, yellow boots and then the long handles of their axes, which they held pressed to their sides like rifles. He would shout with surprise, betraying his presence. They would squat beside him, glad to see him again, and Dushan would look them over close up and confirm once more the strange thing he had guessed: the woodcutters were only pretending they had come down to the city from the mountains, the Pamirs, to make some money. Their only occupation was going about the cramped courtyards, sawing and splitting firewood and stacking it into towers or cupolas or rounded walls as their mood and fancy dictated. A tower meant they felt especially hemmed in on that street: the soul squeezed together from longing and strove upwards, into the open spaces. A cupola, on the contrary, meant they wanted to hide under its vault from some trouble; perhaps they had dreamed of misfortune. If they were feeling brave and courageous that day, if they longed to defend their home from pillage and disgrace, they would imagine themselves leaning against the rounded walls firing rifles, which in their working hours changed back into the axes of the matchoi.*

* *Matchoi*—itinerant woodcutters.

The very song they sang, "I have all I want, I have all I need," seemed to have been born among the cliffs, when everything in nature was raging and a tremendous wind was blowing. M—that was the sound of motion, the force of the wind. AT—the cliff cracked open. CHO—boulders hurtled down, carving out streams. I... MATCHOI... The men hid behind a rock, terrified, amazed, and echoed those sounds. And they invented the song as a spell, to calm the elements:

I have all I want, I have all I need.

I have my two arms and the strength in them.

I have three days' work, yes, and four days free.

Four days I live free—four days I don't eat.

I have all I want, I have all I need.

They did not complain, made no demands. They ate and slept wherever they were working. Young wives and daughters were kept away from them, but if a woman ran past in the courtyard the woodcutters were sure to stop her and put their arms around her waist. Now Dushan wanted to live like that, going from village to village with the two wanderers who pretended to be woodcutters. Something had to be done to smooth out the bad impression Father had made by refusing to let them spend the night in the courtyard.

"No, we don't have room to put you up," Father said angrily. "Come back tomorrow, in the morning." And he hurried them out into the street.

They swung their axes with such a will that the logs seemed to smoke, although for some reason the axes themselves did not sparkle, were dim, tarnished, as if somewhere in the wood they had lost their passion. Nothing could be as quenching, as lulling as wood, especially a dead log that had been a post, a support for the awning or the grape arbor, that had become a mute part of their house and so of their clan. But a chance spark from an axe might rouse the wood, bring back some distant memory of the life of their ancestors—as if the fire of their hearth or the axe had been hiding in the post, patiently waiting its day.

Then the woodcutters stacked the felled posts in a niche of

the courtyard, piling the wood up to the very top in a simple wall, although they had built a cupola under the neighbors' awning. Maybe that was what made Father angry: he could not understand their vagrant moods. Who could tell? Whatever the reason, he turned them out, not even relenting when one of them, as if in jest, said they could spend the night in the niche, standing quietly, as long as they were sheltered from the moonlight—the full moon troubled them somehow, haunted them.

As soon as he heard those words Dushan understood it all. That night he waited, without closing his eyes, for the moment when the black man with the cane bent over him. Caught, found out, the man would run straight across the whole courtyard to the niche, there to change back into a mountain man with an axe so Dushan would be satisfied. He had wanted so for Father to let them stay, not to send them into the street spurned and disgraced. There was plenty of space. They could sleep in Grandmother's room. She would be happy, in her new life, that Dushan's bodyguard had become the protector of their house, a kind and alert tutelary who would watch over the family in her stead.

But now? Had Father unwittingly affronted the guardian of their house, who had called on them, just this once, in the guise of a woodcutter come to chop down the posts?

As he lay in bed Dushan could hear Father and Mother arguing. Mother was wondering about the woodcutters' roaming, their indifference to hardship. They were tall, good-looking men, after all, not crippled or sick. They could have worked at some factory, had homes and families. Wasn't that better than being chased out wherever they went? It was all so odd. She spoke tactfully, but you could tell Father's harshness towards the men had pained her. At first he tried to explain that there was more to the woodcutters' restlessness than she thought. Just two generations back their grandfathers had been nomads. The sons had gone up into the mountains but had never settled down properly. And now something drove the grandsons back into the valley, nomads bereft of lands, of traditions, come to the city as vagabonds, half-thieves.

"But they seemed to be fine fellows—nothing thievish about

them," said Mother. It must have been that "fine fellows" that broke Father's patience at last—as if the words she had used about the strangers were more deeply felt than the praise she had once bestowed on him.

"Well, all right, then. Now you know why I drove them away," he said. In his anger he accented every word and made little pauses between. "They made eyes at you, and you lost your head, got all fluttered. Pitiful. Over two tramps!"

So Father had noticed. When Mother brought them their dinner the woodcutters had bowed to her and tried to start up a conversation. Of course it was only natural that if the black man wanted now to become the guardian of their house he should try to befriend Mother. She would have to get used to him, take Dushan's mysterious night-time world into herself—the full moon, the souls of people who had been murdered, all the things that would no longer be Dushan's alone.

Should he give them to his family? What would be left? Would he be frightened without his bodyguard, like on the day he was sick and it seemed someone's face was jeering down at him from the ceiling of the summer room? Whose face was that? Had it been real, or did he dream it? Perhaps the gargoyle face had not been mocking him, Dushan, at all, but someone else—Mother, for instance. Maybe it was a dream of hers, which had been passed along to her son long ago, just before his birth, as a memory, an experience he was lacking. Mother told him once about a dream she had. Dushan had been unmoved, nearly indifferent, but still he felt somehow that he had seen all of it, lived it. But when? Just a little before he came into the world, while he was in his mother's womb? It was thought that a pregnant woman and her child had the same dreams, and that these dreams brought all the long line of descent—from great-grandfather to great-grandson—into accord. In its waking hours, living afterwards from day to day, the household tired, grew feeble, stored up quarrels, injuries, and bad temper—as Dushan's family was doing now—and finally collapsed altogether.

Dushan remembered those quarrels and decided that only by taking part in his secret through the black bodyguard could the others in the family be joined to him and among themselves in

a deeper bond. The courtyard they shared, the kitchen where food was cooked for all of them, the cabinet where they hung their clothes—these externals, of which they seemingly had wearied, could no longer maintain the family's harmony. Only ties like those between the moon and the souls that flew away into the sky, between the black man with his cane and the woodcutters who had returned through the mountains to the valley, hoping to regain their grazing lands—only such apparently distant and fanciful ties could raise the family above the petty, the accustomed, the humdrum, and fill them with a sense of wonder, could give them something new in which to share. Then they would live in peace.

The next morning the woodcutters came a little earlier and worked faster. They wanted to finish with the posts as quickly as they could. They were already awaited in other courtyards, perhaps, where greater rewards had been offered. Or did the severe looks Father gave them as he stood watching goad them on?

Amon and Dushan gathered up the chips, and Mother looked out the window at the blue-eyed stalwarts. When they noticed her their saws worked lightly, merrily, despite Father's grim silence bearing down on them. Since Grandmother's death there was nothing to keep him from feeling himself master of the house. Was it for the same reason he wanted to dicker with the woodcutters again about their pay? In reply they appealed to his conscience, reminding him that just yesterday he had agreed to the sum they named. But Father demanded they lower their price. He was sure they had intentionally worked slowly, stretching the job out over two days when there was almost nothing to be done. He insisted stubbornly on a reduction, although maybe only because he saw Mother come out into the courtyard several times, no doubt wanting to intervene. But something held her back.

Then it happened, the thing Dushan had feared most. He had often heard Grandmother speak of their house as "decent and chaste" (Father, satirically: "So much so that it's a wonder children have been born into it."), and he was certain the house's spirit would never stand for such unpardonable levity,

such larks and liberties even within the family not to speak of strangers. Yet no sooner had Father gone into his room for the money than one of the woodcutters jestingly threw his arms around Mother's waist, doing a little dance and clowning so she would understand it was all just a harmless prank. Mother did not have time to fend him off, and his embrace was so deft and delicate she probably did not feel his touch at all. She only smiled abashedly. A woman with a European education, she decided, was above prudery or primness, and ought simply to ignore such foolery. When Father had counted out the money, he turned back to the house, leaving it for her and Dushan to see the men to the gate.

But as the woodcutters were leaving they became fidgety once more, lost the restraint and dignity they had displayed throughout the two days Father stood over them. Just before he closed the door one of them said to Mother:

"It must be hard for you living alone with that man. Excuse me."

The other the one who had put his arms around her also apologized, and bowed. No doubt he expected Mother to be flustered by their forwardness this time, and he probably admired her modesty and coolness when she gave no sign of displeasure, simply closed the gate behind them. She stood thinking for a little while before going back to the courtyard, as if she had forgotten about Dushan. And in that long, tense minute it dawned on him: "Yes of course, that's who it was my black man and his double, split apart. How else could they know it's hard for Mother? They've found out everything, Mother's secret name and Father's too, and they're going away."

Dushan wanted to run into the street after them, or tell Mother that the guardian of their house was going away. The guardian knew everything that had happened in the long life of their family, of all the grandfathers and great-grandfathers, and in his kindness had made a vow before eternity itself: never to profane any secret or reveal it for an evil purpose, but to strain out everything paltry and needless the malice, pain, deceit, and sicknesses of the family and pass along only the courage and

high-mindedness. Grandmother had told Dushan so much about the guardian of their house—and now Father had insulted him and thrown him out. By mistake! Not angered intentionally and expelled in bitterness, but sent away because of a misunderstanding, a failure to see.

Should he tell Father? He would probably just laugh as usual and say it was all nonsense, craziness. And that same day, in the evening, when Dushan heard about Father's going away, he felt almost no surprise or regret. It was as if he had known this and grieved over it for a long time, as if he had worn out all his feelings toward Father. He listened calmly to his parents' lengthy and seemingly well thought-out explanations. Only one thing made him glad: the strange way they had behaved not long ago, sending him off to school and then keeping home after the first week, was in fact due to Father's planned departure and not to Dushan's lassitude, sloth, untidy habits, and dullness. He had despised himself for spilling glue on his trousers and losing the textbooks and was ready to believe he was the slowest and laziest pupil in his class—all because of Mother's nervousness.

Dushan saw the hidden meaning of his parent's life, and that life stood before him naked, clear-sighted, and unlovely. Now he understood why Grandmother was always displeased with Father. Up to now he had no way of knowing that Father dreamed of going to some faraway place where doctors were highly paid, so he could save up for a car and an apartment in the European part of the city, where all the people who thought of themselves as well adjusted to modern life had settled. Father said he could not breathe freely in the ancestral home—it was always so hot and dusty. The new apartment was necessary for the prestige of the family, so his sons could make something of themselves, keep up with the times, and not languish in some back street gathering dust, their lives wasted. When Grandmother scoffed at him and accused him of a love for the latest thing, mere trumperies, Father was genuinely astonished.

“What's wrong with being up to date? Yes, I want Dushan to play the piano...” And then for some reason he became angry: probably he realized that Dushan playing the piano made an unlikely picture. “And Amon can take his baths at home, in

a tub. It's comfortable living in an apartment—the ones I've been in—like civilized people. A courtyard isn't everything."

"Listen to him," Grandmother mocked, purposely raising her voice to sway the others; inside she remained unruffled, firmly convinced of her rightness and discernment. "This learned man—he gets so excited when he's talking about his modern, fashionable world, with its luscious smells and glitter, that he can't even frame his thoughts correctly! Was it long ago your father was a nomad? And you, his son, without even putting down roots in the land, want to rush past his village and our city of clay and right into a city of stone. Rashness, I say! Be careful not to forget where you came from—you'll lose yourself and your family. Our beloved Bukhara wasn't built in a day, but house by house. It's the same with people. Everyone should live his own life and not go running after what he wasn't born for." But as the end approached, Grandmother grew weary of this debate. And Father, seeing all her arguments, however well reasoned, giving way before the face of death, became more insistent on his dreams, which simply because they were directed into the future, into life itself, seemed to him rightful. But the life he desired had to be lived for its worth to be felt. Or perhaps its falsity?

Time passed, and once the details of Father's departure had been settled they called in the woodcutters to remove the entire left side of the grape arbor, to cut down the posts, saw them into lengths, and stack the wood in the niche. With no man in the house the grapevine might fall ill. If it were not pruned back, not lightened, the posts might rot and crumble, burying the whole front garden.

But the strange truth was that Father must have felt the commonsense logic in Grandmother's argument about cities of clay and of stone, even if it was not quite in line with the modern, scientific way of thinking. After all, he saw to the bottom of all the tribulations suffered by the woodcutters: they had relinquished their accustomed life in the desert but not yet arrived at a new one, not yet found a resting-place in the mountains. And so they were transformed into drifters in the city. Evidently it was easy to see another's life and just as easy to be

confused about your own, even if it resembled the life you had seen. Understanding and desire had nothing in common. Indeed they were contraries: understanding restrains, desire leads on. Like the woodcutters, Father was pursuing delusion among different lives and cities, from his own country into a foreign land. What drove him? What could satisfy him, when the entire conflict, all the vain struggle between understanding and desire, was inside him? What insatiable part of himself would he appease if he achieved his dream? Might it not be that no sooner would he taste contentment, having settled in his new apartment, than his desires would lead him off in quite another direction? And so on and on—the lot of the vagabond, half-thief.

Of course Dushan did not comprehend all of what fate might hold in store for his father. But remembering his parents' conversation, what Father had said about the woodcutters the night before his departure, he suddenly felt pity: Father was like those men. Perhaps as he watched them he had felt drawn to their wandering ways, their adventures, and that was why he had put them out, refused them shelter for the night. They were all tied together, like Father and the woodcutters, by the obscure desires that troubled them, called to them. And if the black bodyguard had pretended to be a woodcutter, and Father had felt something like kinship towards him, it might be that while Dushan slept he had been watched over not by a man with a cane, existing of himself, but by Father, Father's spirit. And it was not a woodcutter who had embraced Mother jestingly but Father, in those rare hours when they were happy together.

Comforted by this idea, Dushan fell asleep. But on the evening after they saw Father off to his new life, which seemed to him so splendid, no one in the house wanted to go to bed. They spoke almost in whispers of what their life would be like now, without Father. Amon promised Mother to be thoughtful and to protect her. Dushan felt remote from their distress: he was waiting for the bodyguard to return. He would show mercy, disregard Father's insult; he knew it was not easy to be kind and generous, and had learned to bear the scorn of the mean and the wicked. And the unfortunates who commit one foolish

mistake after another were more in need of protection than any others.

Now the black man would slide down a post into the front garden. He would bend over Mother and Amon and see that they were sleeping fitfully, moaning and turning from side to side. Then he would move quietly towards Dushan's bed, sighing so the boy would know to shut his eyes and not be frightened. Dushan waited. Close to midnight he heard a burst of wind dash across the grape arbor: the leaves lifted, and the whole vine huddled together and began to quake. It was as if the gust had been lying on the wall ever since evening, watching intently, and now had sprung and rushed away with its victim, which had been cowering among the vines. What prey had the wind taken? A worm or a calf-beetle that had felt autumn drawing near and crawled onto the shaggiest stalk to hide from the rain and cold. And the wind, which made sure each courtyard had a sufficiency of people, birds, and beetles (without which everything would languish and die), had picked up the beetle and carried it, trembling with fright, across walls, streets, and houses to the very courtyard which had long been without a beetle of its own in the front garden, and there set it down gently on the leaves.

Dushan wanted to divert himself, but he could not shake off the sadness. He listened to the rustlings in the courtyard. The black man had not returned, although the moon had already risen high enough to shine into Dushan's face. Ordinarily he did not turn aside: he would feel the ethereal light pierce his skin and irradiate his whole body, looking into his heart, into his veins with the blood flowing through them. And this distant, alien visitation made Dushan feel so light he might float away any moment—he would cling to the headboard of his bed, breathing rapidly.

But now the moonlight, descending from timelessness, passed through the time of early autumn and turned gray. Feeling it, Dushan rolled away and pulled the covers over his head. It occurred to him that it was probably this light, which had lost all its bright colors, that made people's faces gray and haggard after a sleepless night.

So he was left without his bodyguard, without the spirit of

his father, whom covetousness had led off on a chase. And that night he sensed his other ties were slipping away too. The wind which had always brought him coolness was dissolving their agreement, the moon was turning aside from him, and the beetles did not want to live in their courtyard any more all so that he might experience the most grievous, the starker kind of orphanhood, in comparison with which life without a father, without a mother even, would seem less hard.

His mother and father, by the way, had seen this long before. They understood that Amon, despite all his boastfulness and audacity, was far closer to them than his brother and needed their love and care. Dushan, so home-loving, tender-hearted, and delicate, lived apart from them in spirit, seeking protection, solace, and intimacy outside his home and family in a shadowy world felt only by the most impressionable natures. Perhaps this was why his parents had agreed a rarity in those days that after Father's departure Dushan should be sent to a boarding school while Amon remained with mother: it would be easier for her without her backward younger son, without his laziness and his queer, stubborn caprices.

The next day saw the beginning of a mad race and pursuit along corridors in the part of the city to which Father dreamed of moving. Mother went on to the next office, and Dushan sat down on the stairs. He wanted to escape from the noise and the crowds, the bustle and commotion of the street. As he stared into the windows of the building opposite he remembered something Father had said and tried to think of himself playing the piano behind those curtains, up among the balconies where the pampered house-dogs barked. He smiled at the picture of himself seated at the instrument, his long, white fingers roaming its keys. It was not that he had no liking for music or did not want to play he wanted to very much, imagining that he was talented, sensitive (everybody would be thrilled by his playing; they would say their drowsing, spent city had never produced another like him). But Dushan was so upset by this endless quest for papers, so disheartened, that only self-mockery could defend him, help him to recover his balance.

The first two days they had spent in the stone city, returning

to the old city of clay only to sleep. Mother had tried to reassure Dushan. She explained that getting admitted to a boarding school was not easy—forms to fill out, red tape. But now she herself was harassed and short-tempered.

Dushan stood inert beside the doors. Mother did not even glance at him as she hurried along the corridor to get still another signature, repeating that everything would be all right, Uncle Nabi-Zade was helping them. At home Dushan examined the stamped papers in secret, reading on each one his own name printed in large letters: Dushan Temuri. For some reason this troubled him. He liked his name and wanted everyone to know it, to pronounce it with awe and excitement. Enraptured by his musical gift, even a person who was ignoble, wretched, could overcome the lowness in himself and be imbued with lofty sentiments by the mere sound of it: Dushan Temuri. But now he was suddenly dismayed by its constant reiteration in these papers (“running from office to office”—Grandfather’s voice): it was as if his name was being dulled, forced into confinement. The people in the offices asked it unenthusiastically and wrote it laboriously. Even Mother seemed annoyed by it. He had seen his name misspelled several times: before rewriting it the clerk would get up from his desk, vexed, and stand by the window for a while smoking a cigarette, as if he were wrestling with doubt or despair. People wondered who had thought of it and asked about his father—as if Dushan were illegitimate and that was why he had been given such a curious name. They seemed to be inspecting it suspiciously from every angle. They rolled it on their tongues and tried pronouncing it alone, cut off from his family name, the name of his father and mother. They sensed that it was fictitious, not his secret name, not the real one. And this kept on until Dushan felt so humiliated and numb (he had done something forbidden, broken some law) that suddenly he understood: his fatigue and indifference, his restiveness and the anger he felt against everything, against Mother—this was what was called “being torn away”.

Yes, that must be it. All this was designed to tear him away altogether from Mother and Amon, from the memory of Grandmother, so he could leave without pain for boarding school,

for a life that had no resemblance to the one he knew, had experienced. And if now his fate was changing drastically, forfeiting its natural course among things and times understood and felt, being compelled to unroll among things and times that were alien, remote, it meant he was not intended to live fully, expansively, but simply to be, to endure and survive.

He would have to pretend he was content there, with the kind teachers about whom Mother talked so much, as if she knew them each personally and the thoughtful, intelligent boys who were gentle and friendly, they would accept him into their midst gladly and never hurt his feelings.

Mother's copious descriptions, despite their vividness, had an air of the artificial, of make-believe. Before he ever set eyes on it, Dushan began to think of the school as a place where it was better to seem than to be, for it was a place with long-fixed ways and a life of its own, a life he had never experienced and so feared.

But he was already at the age when despite his outward appearance of simplicity and directness—the appearance of childhood—he had inwardly, covertly, begun to pass into the next age, the most changeable, melancholy, and dangerous of all. Not only Dushan's thoughts but even his exterior was often deceptive. On days when he was fretful and nervous he would look well rested. His face seemed to be illuminated from within; it became beguiling, even charming. It was as if the energy expended on worry and distress enlivened him, as if nervous tension were his element. Repose and ease, on the contrary, made him dreary.

Even his mother was misled sometimes. On the morning they were to leave, she expected him to be peevish and reproachful. When she came out into the courtyard and glanced at her son she was surprised and gratified to see him looking composed and well. But no sooner had the car pulled away from the house and turned onto the main street, carrying them towards the little town of Zarmitan, than Dushan's spirits lifted. It was as if now all his heavy-heartedness had passed to Mother, who for the past few days had been fussy and preoccupied. Now she squeezed his hand, trembling all over as if she were straining to

gather up her grief and break into tears. But Dushan withdrew from her troubles; he was already wondering how he would be received in Zarmitan. His mood now was one he had never known before. Something in him must have taken up a new position: his weakness and faint-heartedness had been pushed aside, making him more yielding and broadening his perceptions. And all this motion called up a simple and consoling thought: "It will be all right. You have to take the bitter in life along with the sweet." Grandmother or Father had said that, though at the time he did not understand or appreciate it. The phrase had lain dormant deep inside him, unneeded, but now it awoke in his memory and found its way to his heart. He was surprised to find his own feelings expressed in the wise words of another.

Dushan felt more confident, and the things waiting for him ahead no longer seemed so frightening. He made up his mind not to count the trees and poles, not to memorize the details of the road along which Bakhshillo, their neighbor, was driving. However hard it might be there he would not run away. This resignation was brought by the same shift in feeling that had calmed him and made Mother suffer in his place.

Bakhshillo was strangely silent, as if he had turned away from Dushan forever, as if he were angry with him for having to leave home, be parted from Mother and Amon—angry not so much with the boy himself as with his fate, which no one had foreseen. He had always treated Dushan with affection. "Did you sleep well, Master Dushan?" (That was what everyone had called him when he was a little boy.) "What happened to your cheek, Master Dushan? Did a bumblebee sting you?" It might have been that when Bakhshillo heard Dushan would not be living on their street any longer he decided to tear him out of his heart once and for all, to make himself callous by not thinking any more about his small defenseless neighbor. The change that began with Father, or perhaps with some distant ancestor, had touched their lives, his and Mother's, and now passed on to an outsider, Bakhshillo, making him cold and unfeeling.

Dushan was so busy with his musings that he missed the

whole trip. Before he knew it they were coming into Zarmitan. He was surprised by its resemblance to the village where Grandfather lived: a stream ran beside the outlying houses, and there were mulberry trees in a field to the left of a hill. It was as if the interrupted visit were being resumed. And he had thought, as he left the country on the day of Grandmother's death, that all the new experiences he would miss had remained behind for somebody else to enjoy. So all the things that happened in their house while he was at boarding school, all those days and years, would not be lost forever either. They would be repeated for him unexpectedly, in some unfamiliar place—perhaps after many years, when he was old. And then he would find out what Mother and Amon had talked about and thought while he was away. How strange, the way life trudged around in a circle, mixing up places and times! Fate set out the whole design of a person's life before he was even born.

And it came to Dushan that now, in the boarding school, he would meet again the boys who had meant to show them the thickets. How would he talk to them in Uzbek? What should he tell them about his brother? Amon had promised to bring them mint-flavored gum from the city, to break them of chewing wax that smelled like bitter candles.

"How can I talk to people there?" he whispered to Mother. She had been reproaching herself for not being able to arrange things so her son could live at home, and was glad that he had broken the silence at last. She told him there was no need to worry, three languages were spoken at the school: Tajik, Uzbek, and Russian. You could use whichever you knew best, or switch back and forth—they would understand you perfectly. This was the only time Bakhshillo was unable to maintain his detachment:

"But don't you get them confused, Master Dushan. Try to speak our language as much as you can—Tajik. It's already fading out in Bukhara..." As he talked on earnestly the car passed the low sandy hill and came up to a big, long building standing alone. The road to the gate lay beside its hot walls, which were lined with thorn bushes.

Boys followed the car with shouts and whistles, running

along on top of the clay wall, jumping down into the bushes. Looking at these boisterous scamps, Dushan realized they must be from the school. Clearly they were not constrained by strict rules—being so much like Grandfather's village, Zarmitan must have an easy, relaxed atmosphere.

"Stop here," Mother said to Bakhshillo, pointing to an old-fashioned double gate. She got out of the car hurriedly. Her words seemed to throw a chill over the resigned assurance Dushan had felt on the journey from his home in the city to the stream, the hill and this gate. All at once he became fidgety, as if adopting Mother's mood and copying her rapid, purposely unnatural movements were now the only way he could gain confidence among strangers.

"But she will be leaving in a few minutes," he thought. "What can I do then?" Out of the corner of his eye he watched a little window open in the gate. Someone's hand reached out, and Mother gave him a piece of paper, evidently a pass.

The gates swung wide, and Dushan, who was expecting a cramped, airless place, was surprised by the spacious courtyard that was revealed. Far off to the sides were two rows of classroom windows. At this distance the boys sitting behind them would not be able to get a good look at him.

It was no use turning to Mother for support, he thought. From now on he would be on his own. Once more he retreated into himself. They went across the courtyard and then along a corridor to a second one, even larger, which was divided into an upper and a lower square. Here were more classrooms, and two staircases leading up to galleries. He felt something drawing him away, a slight vagueness or abstraction. "I wonder why Bakhshillo called me 'Master Dushan,'" he thought. "I've been just 'Dushan' for a long time." Was it because when someone was torn away from his home he suddenly became small again in the eyes of others? Or perhaps Bakhshillo had had only addressed him courteously because Dushan was part of an old and distinguished family—not only its members but even its sheep ought to be treated with deference. This stray bit of whimsy had crossed his mind as he inspected the first, front courtyard, which was gray and rather uninviting. This second one, though,

was stunningly beautiful: pale-blue tiles covering both squares, carved doors, decorations on the outside walls and the wooden awning. Its interplay of colors and lines gave it a flavor of refinement and antiquity.

Mother pointed all this out to him, hoping it would divert him. And she told him that the building used to be the guest palace of Arif, a Bukharan prince—as if not only the appearance of the school but also that name, Arif, could impart to Dushan a sense of the place, an attachment to it. But he was looking at the windows, the indistinct faces of the teachers and boys. They left the courtyard by a second, stone corridor, and here they were engulfed in a crowd of boys. They seemed to recognize Dushan as a newcomer immediately. As they rushed past each of them tried to bump him with a shoulder; on their first encounter they were bringing him into their rude life of force, pranks, and horseplay.

They were boys like the ones on his street, or in Grandfather's village, or in the city school Dushan had attended for a single week. But here they were wilder and rougher, tanned from playing beside the stream, noisy and independent without their parents' supervision. A boy crawled past croaking and spitting streams of water on the wall. Another boy sat astride him, roaring with laughter and swaying from side to side. In the crush someone stepped on Dushan's foot. The boy returned at once, glowering. "Give it back," he demanded. Seeing Dushan's bewilderment, he put out his right foot and whispered menacingly, "Come on—step on it." Afterwards he ran off, satisfied. Without even knowing it he had taught the novice one of the rules by which they lived together.

Dushan thought that was how they got acquainted with a new boy: looking him over, stepping on his foot, giving him a shove, squeezing him, as if by accident, against a corridor wall clammy with their breathing, checking his spirit and trying to find out his weaknesses so they could tell the others. But he did not know yet that in all this buffeting there was a limit. Blows to the head, to the belly, were permitted. But even in the most abandoned brawl the attacker always avoided unconsciously one forbidden target—the foot. If even the strongest boy chanced to

step on his opponent's foot he would pull back, shamed, and put out his own foot as a token of reconciliation, as the red-headed boy had done just now in the hallway. The chaos of fights and savage beatings gave birth to a sense of guilt, pangs of conscience. Ferocity and unrestraint circumscribed themselves with unwritten laws, and one of these, perhaps the first among them in childhood, was "giving back the footprint".

Anyone who did not give back a footprint was sure to meet with misfortune: illness and bad marks for the younger boys, weakness in fights and disappointment in love for the older ones. But Dushan knew none of this yet. He followed his mother into a third courtyard, which opened off the corridor, and was amazed at its broad, white expanse, made somber by the gaze of two rows of classrooms.

These rooms with their uniform windows and doors were like something alien imposed on the courtyard, which was filled with air and sunshine, the cries and tumult of boys playing in its depths. Their appearance mingled something stern and unnatural into the easygoing cheerfulness of all that space.

But oddly enough it was precisely in the row of classrooms that Dushan found something comforting, even familiar. As they were going by an open window, Mother pointed to the silhouette of a teacher in one of the rooms and bent down awkwardly to whisper, "Pai-Khambarov... Dushan." The teacher seemed to hear his own name coupled with the strange name of the newcomer ("Pai-Khambarov Dushan"). He looked out the window in surprise and then nodded amiably to Mother. Indicating Dushan, he asked in a strict, quizzical tone, "Is that the one? The naughty boy?"

"Yes, this is the one." Mother nodded back at him eagerly, as if she were glad they agreed in that assessment: naughty boy. At the same time the whole class craned their necks to stare at Dushan.

Struggling with his shyness, Dushan looked squarely at Pai-Khambarov and all the other faces in the two windows. After this exchange he felt reassured, as his mother had when she caught sight of Pai-Khambarov. And when the teacher came out to greet them, leaving the noisy class unattended, Dushan's

anxiety vanished altogether: there was something accustomed, kindred even, in the whole air of this man—a softness and weakness, a peculiar melancholy.

And the hand he put on Dushan's shoulder was so light, almost weightless. Pai-Khambarov stooped slightly to catch Mother's words:

"Well, I've brought him to you. I'm leaving him." Probably the gentle sympathy emanating from Pai-Khambarov was all that kept her from crying.

"Fine. Excellent," he replied. He looked again at Dushan without removing his hand. "We won't put him in class today. He can rest a little and run around the courtyard, get used to it. You may go, boy." By saying not "Dushan," and not "pupil"—as he would when displeased—but "boy", Pai-Khambarov no doubt meant: You have been preparing to come here for many days. I know all about your curiosity and fears, and the fuss and bother your mother put you through. You have passed across courtyards and down hallways, through crowds and turmoil. But you are not one of us yet. You must make an effort, prove yourself worthy of acceptance and love.

Dushan's feelings were hurt. But Mother walked lightly now, as if they had long since accepted and come to love her in this place. She led Dushan back to the second courtyard, where his class's recreation room was, and sat him down at a table. Then she began a hasty farewell, fixing him with unblinking eyes:

"I'm counting on you very, very much. Remember, it's not for long. I'll be back again on Sunday." Dushan listened without compassion or tenderness, and when she left he went on sitting as before, listless and indifferent. He saw through the window that Mother did not go back to the first courtyard, towards the gate, but returned for some reason to the third. Soon she reappeared, talking with Pai-Khambarov.

"She's not the one who's being left here," thought Dushan. "Why was he so unfriendly to me?" He was wounded, jealous even. "This makes two times he's walked with her." But then Dushan began to feel calmer. He decided it would not be bad at all, having Pai-Khambarov for his teacher. He had a woman teacher in the school he had been taken out of, and maybe that

was why they had thought he was slow. He would get a fresh start here, try to overcome his lethargy and indolence.

This thought might have gladdened and soothed Dushan were it not for the strange sensation that came over him as he sat alone in the silent room. He was insulated from everything outside him, as if his ears, his whole head, were clogged with some dense fluid that kept out every sound. All he could hear was a ringing that came from inside his tired body.

On the way to the school, and as he walked down its corridors and across its courtyards, Dushan had felt relaxed, composed. But every word or gesture that pained him, every new worry or distress, pushed him back into himself. And then the obscure uneasiness growing constantly inside would make him numb.

As he groped to understand what was happening to him, he looked at the walls, the bookshelf, and the little table in the corner where the games were kept. This room, the courtyard, the hallways, the walls and passages, filled him with a sense of the known, the familiar. And that strange feeling returned: He had been here before, lived here, and now nothing here could move him or give him joy. But could it be? Someone in his family—a great-grandfather, say—might have made his acquaintance with the world of classrooms in some mosque school with a courtyard like this one. Had the generations of the past stored up so much experience, passion, and suffering that for the latecomers, like Dushan, nothing remained, or barely enough for them to taste wonder and delight just once? Then the last portion of the unknown, the unfathomed would be gone, and the family would sicken and die, starved for fresh emotions, crushed beneath everything it knew.

Dushan sat tranquil now. His recent apprehensions seemed absurd, as if somebody else had gone through all that turmoil and he himself had been living at the school for a long time. Here was that woman again. She had been in and out several times already, grumbling to herself as she dusted a table, put a trash basket back in its corner. She only heightened the sense of a timeworn, monotonous existence.

A boy, Appak, came running into the room out of breath

and sat down looking at Dushan. He too seemed familiar. And something unpleasant had been connected with him—a fight.

“You have a funny name—Dushan.” Appak smiled crookedly.

Dushan was offended, but he hid it. With dignity and as much dispassion as he could muster he explained:

“I was born on a Monday, you see, and that’s not a very good day. But my parents didn’t want to be dissatisfied with fate, or show they didn’t like Monday. They decided to name me Dushan* so that day would be lucky for me.” Grandmother had told him to say that if people laughed at his name. Of course it was forbidden to reveal that the name was not his real one anyway.

“But then it ought to be ‘Dusham.’ ” Appak had liked the way Dushan spoke, his coolness. He was looking at him curiously now, without malice.

“Yes, certainly, ‘Dusham.’ But ‘Dushan’ is easier to say, more natural.” And he reflected that even his outer, pretended name had a trick to it—not “m” but “n”.

“I see. Like a dragon’s babies are called dragonlets, but a cow’s are called calves.” Probably Appak was tired of all this sage discussion. He told how Pai-Khambarov had thrown him out of class and ordered him to mop the floor in the recreation room as a punishment.

“But the floor here is clean already. You won’t tell, will you?” Then he wanted to take Dushan into the dormitory so the newcomer could claim the empty bed next to his own.

“Undress and get between the sheets. If they try to chase you out, say you’ve got a fever. We can do pretty much what we like, and nobody gets after us. Pai-Khambarov might put you out of class, but only if you hit him by accident. We shoot apricot pits out of brass tubes—I was the one who thought of it. Now the whole school is looking everywhere for tubes. Some dope even tried to break a water line. Come on, let’s get you to bed. They want to put Rabbim next to me, and he smells bad.”

Appak picked up Dushan’s suitcase and tugged him by the arm towards the door. Dushan was disconcerted, could not

* From *Dushambe*—“Monday”.

think what to do. It would be wrong to go to bed in the daytime, pretend you were ill, just to suit the whim of this imperious Appak, shooter of apricot pits. To keep from lying to Pai-Khambarov he probably would have to lie to Appak, humiliate himself by saying he smelled bad too. Otherwise he would never be left in peace.

But just at that moment the whole class came running into the room, sweeping Dushan and Appak into a corner. Dushan had heard a confused rumbling as the boys came across the courtyard, but nonetheless their appearance was a surprise. They whistled and stamped their feet: now, in idleness and games, they would run in the courtyards and hallways until evening. Not even the harsh rules of a boys' boarding school could spoil those carefree hours.

They began to look Dushan over, though now they did not shove as they had in the corridor. They gazed at him with exaggerated attention—some to express an immediate dislike, others showing their indifference. But there were some, like Appak, who made friends easily. They came up to Dushan and extended their hands in silence to be shaken. Afterwards they moved away.

Between the end of classes and time to eat, the boys were sent into the recreation room so they would not skylark in the courtyard or peek into the windows of the upper-grade rooms. This was explained to Dushan by Mordekhai, who directed his dreary, unwinking gaze not at Dushan's face but at his buttoned-up collar. Pai-Khambarov had told him to show Dushan the washroom and the dormitory.

The washroom, with its multitude of copper faucets jutting from damp, buckling walls, was adjacent to the room from which Appak and Mordekhai had called Dushan into the courtyard. Its door was the fourth in a row between the lower and upper squares, and exactly like the other three. Looking at all those doors, Dushan was overcome with a sense of something lost. It was as if he had entered through one of them looking for something he had forgotten, and now could not recall what it was. The next door opened onto the dormitory, and the boys went in to put Dushan's suitcase in the row with the other boys'

sacks and suitcases.

Dushan noticed how neatly the beds had been made up. The whole look of the dormitory was in sharp contrast with the washroom. The order and cleanliness seemed to bother Appak: he threw himself on a bed, shouting, rolling from side to side, ignoring Mordekhai's pleas. Finally he spilled the blanket onto the floor and raced out of the room.

"He's my enemy," Mordekhai explained shyly. "He wants me to get in trouble for the mess he made. It's my day on duty today—I'm supposed to make sure everything is tidy." While he and Dushan were straightening the blanket he asked, "Will you be sleeping next to him?"

"I don't know. I guess they'll tell me where to sleep."

"He gets up in the middle of the night and opens the window. Says we have to let out the snores. And these black moths come in. They're all squishy, like worms—something between moths and caterpillars. And they ooze this white stuff right in your face." Mordekhai seemed about to confide some other terrible thing, but then he caught sight of Pai-Khambarov through the window and whispered: "Hurry, or we'll catch it."

"For what?" Dushan wanted to ask. He had already concluded that Pai-Khambarov was a mild, even-tempered man.

They rushed out of the dormitory, only to bump into their teacher in the courtyard. Pai-Khambarov looked at the two boys pointedly, as if he wanted to divine what they were up to. He said to Mordekhai: "So, have you shown the new boy everything?" Without waiting for an answer, he went on towards the recreation room. He did not even give Dushan another look.

Once more Dushan felt slighted by Pai-Khambarov's inattention. He had taken a liking to his teacher right away, and while he was sitting in the recreation room he had thought of the things Pai-Khambarov might say to hearten him. But then he decided it was foolish to be offended: after all, Pai-Khambarov knew almost nothing about him. He did not know how Dushan missed his father—the boy did not admit that even to himself. He must think Dushan was like Appak, with his apricot-pit gun, or Mordekhai, with his horror of moths.

"All right, then," thought Dushan. "I'll get along by myself,

without Pai-Khambarov." Now everyone was shouting, "Meat patties and macaroni!" They sped off to the washroom, leaving him alone and bewildered in the courtyard.

In the dining room, which was next to the dormitory, the older boys were already eating. There was a buzz of voices and the clattering of spoons. Boys shouldered one another at a little window, handing through plates of soup.

Dushan tried the soup but could not eat it. His appetite had disappeared somewhere. As he pushed away the plate of macaroni, he remembered the words of the dove-woman: "May you eat the food of strangers in their midst all your life."

But he could not get up and say, "I, Dushan Temuri, can go for weeks at a time without eating. So don't get your hope up." He had thought of that once, but now he could not do it. Now he would be unable to do many important things he had imagined. And so it was not only his parents' life that had been changed, turned inside out. He, Dushan, was different too, not the way he had pictured himself.

"Don't you want that?" The boy sitting next to him, who was called Yamin, pulled Dushan's plate towards himself. "I'll bet you've been eating sausage on the sly."

"But they're pork," Dushan said, making a wry face.

"Yes, probably. You were eating it."

"No, I don't eat pork," Dushan replied, certain he had won a point.

"Dushan, don't let him have it! Eat it yourself!" Appak shouted down the wide table over the heads of the boys. He must have been watching his own plate with one eye and Dushan's with the other the whole while.

"I'm not hungry... After the trip," Dushan answered. He saw the others raise their eyes, looking at him and making note of his name.

"Put the patty in your bag. It'll keep until tonight. There'll be cabbage for supper—you can throw it out. Do you have a bag?" Appak asked in a concerned, business-like tone. It was only now Dushan noticed that all the other boys, as they piled their spoons with their right hands, held bags pressed to the

table with their left. Their parents brought them treats from home on Sundays.

Without thinking, Dushan mumbled once more that he did not eat pork. He had barely got the words out when the whole dining room began to laugh. The boys banged their spoons and stamped their feet under the table. Yamin stoked the merriment: "Oh, he's really stuck on that idea! Doesn't eat pork— a fussy eater!" Finally Pai-Khambarov spoke up:

"Stop that, Yamin. Don't forget we only have twenty minutes to eat. The fourth and seventh are already outside waiting."

Dushan glanced around in surprise and saw that Pai-Khambarov was eating in the same room, at a little table in the corner. A moment later he heard the teacher's voice right beside him:

"You really don't eat pork?"

Dushan was startled: the question was unexpected, and he had not realized Pai-Khambarov could come over to him so quickly. He got up, sputtering:

"Once a neighbor told me I would eat strangers' food in their midst all my life, and ever since then I haven't been able to eat it... No one eats pork at home." He was both shocked by his unusual loquacity and glad of it. Ordinarily taciturn and reserved, he suddenly found himself confessing, in his nervousness, to something he would rather not have talked about. "It must have been pork she meant."

"How odd," said Pai-Khambarov, looking inquisitively at Dushan. "You will have to get used to pork, though, or you'll find it hard living here." And as he moved away he turned the conversation back to everyday topics, joking: "Those seventh-graders will break the door down."

The taunt seemed to be directed not so much at the seventh-grade boys themselves as at their teacher—a woman could be seen through the window. Pai-Khambarov said something humorous about her to his colleagues, and they laughed gleefully.

Dushan rested with the others after dinner and then sat with them in the recreation room as they puffed and groaned over their lessons, but he felt cut off again. It was like that until

evening, when they were allowed to amuse themselves in the big courtyard, where there was a playing field of sand trampled smooth by hundreds of bare feet.

Groups of boys played ball in various parts of the field. The teachers sat in a circle of canework chairs, relaxing and chatting. Older boys watered the ground around them so an unexpected burst of wind would not coat the teachers in the warm evening dust. It must have been this splashing of water that set him free of his isolation from the school's everyday routine. Of course there could be no repose and idle chatter without a surrounding island of coolness—even now, when the heat, unrelenting since the early morning, was whisked off into the sky towards evening by a sudden breeze and yielded up the long hours of twilight and night to coolness. Just before sunrise, which would bring the heat again, there would even be a few touches of winter cold.

As he watched the teachers lounging, yawning luxuriously (Pai-Khambarov was among them), Dushan remembered the long evening tea-drinkings of his father, who seemed to wait more than anyone for the time when Amon and Dushan would water down the courtyard. Then Father would stretch out on the bed, retiring from the family's conversations, so that he could savor with his whole being every moment passing slowly until sleep. "The golden hour of the Bukharan"—that was what Grandmother called it.

So everything was known and familiar. And for Pai-Khambarov too despite his show of diligence, all the daily life of the classroom, the dining room, and the recreation room (which must have been named so out of mere irony) was only time to be got through for the sake of minutes such as these, when he could take his ease in a canework chair left over from the days of Prince Arif.

But before Dushan could think this through to the end the boys called for him to join them. They pushed him into their midst and threw the ball at his feet several times, wanting to test his skill. He kicked it clumsily a couple of times in the direction of Appak and Mordekhai and then went back to the edge of the field. He was surprised to see Mordekhai, who was

weak and sickly looking, running back and forth at full tilt: he was trying doggedly to equal the fleet and the agile so the other boys would not scorn him.

But Dushan would not pretend. He was no runner: when he appeared in shorts on the vacant lot the boys had laughed at him, pointing to his spindly legs and flat feet. He had long since made up his mind that people would have to take him as he was. He could not stoop to tricks and toadying so that others would like him.

"That's right," he remembered Grandmother saying. "Stay true to yourself." She was sitting beside the middle window of the summer room, trying to pick a red beetle with black specks—a ladybird—out of Dushan's hair.

*Ladybird, ladybird,
Fly away home,
Your house is on fire,
And your children all gone.*

That dark nursery-rhyme—maybe it was that the children were wicked: they had set the house on fire and run away just at the moment when their mother had got tangled in someone's hair, when her very life was at Dushan's mercy. She had so far to fly. Her home was in the sky, inconceivably far away.

"They probably set the house on fire frying pork patties," Dushan thought derisively. He wanted to make up something more about the ladybird and her cruel children, joining one thought boldly, joltingly to another one, seemingly unconnected. But he was interrupted by a teacher shouting: "First grade, to the left. Fourth, to the right, next to sixth."

The boys were assembled in ranks right there on the playing field. Dushan saw the teachers sulking: they did not want to get up from their chairs, or even budge. They were so comfortable where they were. He overheard Pai-Khambarov grumbling: "He has to hold these ridiculous daily assemblies to hide his own incompetence." But Dushan did not know what he meant.

He meant the daily meetings at which Director Ablyaasanov reviewed the day that had just passed at the school and passed

judgement on it. He spoke with feeling, sometimes with heat, letting out all the frustrations that had built up during the day. Before going off to the washroom, the boys were assembled around the director, teachers, cooks, and groom, so they all could look at each other once more. But now they put away shouts and bustle, stood solemnly still. The ceremony seemed to draw a line between day and night; the silence was meant to fill their dreams with its individual, deeply personal content. Indeed with time Dushan became so accustomed to these assemblies every evening that he was able to divide his feelings into the collective and the personal, the intimate, where no one dare intrude. The assembly was a turning point: afterwards he was free to devote himself to his inner world.

The teachers hurried them impatiently to their places, but all the same it took a long time for the ranks to form. Many of the older boys had been roaming the back streets of Zarmitan, far from the school. Everyone waited for them to climb over the wall. Dushan watched with trepidation as they jumped down and ran to their classmates. The teachers pretended not to notice anything.

Dushan counted over the group of adults, losing track several times before he arrived at his total: forty in all, including the cooks and the laundresses. There was Pai-Khambarov, walking slowly, as if he were parting the little group. He stopped nonchalantly beside the woman teacher he had joked about in the dining room and began talking with her. His bearing was studiously erect, waggish. The woman answered unwillingly, even sharply: Pai-Khambarov said something more and peered expectantly into her embarrassed face.

Dushan, who had been looking over the other teachers, returned to this pair. Only these two held his gaze, perhaps because they shared some secret not yet guessed by the others. They too probably sensed that separately neither of them was remarkable, that only together, side by side, did they attract attention. Dushan was so absorbed in watching the elegant and ironic Pai-Khambarov and the woman with whom he was bantering that he missed the moment of the director's appearance. Without ever having seen Ablyassanov, Dushan feared him for

his weakness, stubbornness, and independence. For some reason he was sure the director would always be against him.

But what Ablyaasanov now began to say did not seem at all frightening to Dushan—probably because he could not understand it. The teachers stood on either side of their head, listening with feigned respect.

“Last night,” began Ablyaasanov. And those very first words, spoken angrily, without any prelude or oratorical flourishes, gave Dushan new hope in the director. “I don’t know what to call them...”

“Hoodlums! Saboteurs!” came voices from the crowd of boys, along with laughter, squeals, and the stamping of feet.

Ablyaasanov paused to glower at the boys. His eye fell on Dushan, who cowered inwardly in anticipation of the director’s wrath. But instead he heard:

“Thank you, those are precisely the words. Being an old man, I almost forgot and called them fine fellows, shining examples of school spirit.” Then he turned indignant once more: “What’s wrong with our watchmen? Why don’t they catch the boys that are out wrecking the gardens of the good citizens of Zarmitan, when they should be in bed, sleeping? For shame!” He spoke unaffectedly, from the heart, as if he were giving vent to his displeasure at home, in his family circle. Again he broke off in irritation, then collected himself and resumed: “Is this your gratitude, my friends? We bring you here from the orphanage, put you in with our first four grades—boys whose parents are alive, thank God—and you thank us by creating all this chaos and confusion...”

“Radishes and onions,” came a voice from the ranks of boys standing opposite, regarding him with fixed stares of exaggerated attention.

“Yes, exactly! I’ll tell the cook to give you that tomorrow.” The director turned away for a moment from his speech, as if answering good-naturedly to remarks from friends, rather than those whom he was castigating as hoodlums, as if he were playing a game with them. Then he stormed on:

“No, I’ll get to the bottom of this! We’ll catch the offenders, the ones who are insulting the good citizens of Zarmitan.

If it comes to that, we'll ask to be separated from the orphanage—we had to send our girls away because of you. Ha! Try keeping them here—that would really be asking for it! Hoodlums from the orphanage, ordinary boys with parents, and girls... You've lost all sense of shame!"

Dushan saw that Ablyaasanov's words had no effect, intimidated no one. The boys were poking one another, shoving—they seemed to look on the whole thing as a harmless lecture from someone they knew would go no further than threats. Of all the two hundred boys, only Dushan found the harangue interesting and significant. Being new, he thought it was all serious. But why did Ablyaasanov speak as if he were trying to parody Dushan's own father?

He remembered how Father had told them about his new boss. Standing in the courtyard, he had mimicked the man's grave air and gestures, which little by little became helpless and pitiful. Father had even used some of the same expressions: "good citizens" and "lost all sense of shame". When he had laughed his fill, he told Grandmother how hard it was to behave like a European at the office, as modern manners demanded, when at home you followed the traditional, Oriental ways. The shifting back and forth could make even the nicest, kindest people into stuffed shirts, and they themselves sensed this and suffered from it. The conversation had taken place in the evening. A thunderstorm was coming up, and the fragrance of the oleander was acrid, as if distilled from the surrounding dust. Dushan had not listened very carefully; he could not remember now what Grandmother had said in reply.

Of course Dushan had not yet perceived that it was this duality, the irreconcilable friction between the European and Oriental parts of Ablyaasanov, that made him comical. But as he listened to the director and watched him Dushan sensed a kindness, too, an ingenuous directness. There was something rough and countrified—grandfatherly—about the man, something congenial. It reminded Dushan of the night-time conversation he had overheard in the country, Grandfather's admitting that he had taken a drink just "for courage—to face the lawyer". He remembered also one morning at home in the city: Dushan

had just got up, and as always was sitting gloomy and silent, still half asleep. Trying to cheer him, Grandfather had said a curious thing: "The fox knows a lot of little secrets, and the hedgehog just one—but a great one, the secret of the chosen few. The fox's secrets are for everyday living." Grandmother, who almost never discussed serious matters with this country relation, for once condescended to disagree—probably more from a desire to contradict than out of conviction.

"How could a small creature like the hedgehog, skulking from tree to tree, carry something great within itself? I'll never believe it. It would be the fox who knows a great secret. She won't touch the hedgehog because she despises him. The fox simply puts out her paw, and the cowardly hedgehog rolls up in a ball. The fox goes away in contempt."

"Goes away, yes, but not in contempt—shamefaced." Grandfather spoke eagerly; he seemed delighted to have found at last his equal in certainty and stubbornness, someone with whom he could talk over all the things he had stored up inside him. "She senses there is something concealed in the hedgehog." But here Grandmother, seeming to repent of her condescension, put on a haughty expression and walked off, as if to say that the truth was so obvious as not to require the support of her arguments.

It was all so confused and complicated. Some things Dushan thought out clearly, others came to him only in flashes of intuition. Perhaps Father, as he made fun of his boss there in the courtyard, had without knowing or wishing it been giving voice to his resentment against Dushan's country grandfather. But how could that be? They were of the same blood, Grandfather was Father's own father. The hidden resentment might have been born on the day when Grandfather, for the first and last time, had taken Grandmother's side against his son. Together they had ridiculed his desire to make his fortune far from wife and children, not fearing that the family would collapse without a man. When Father satirized his boss, was there something sound in his human nature laughing at his own weaknesses?

The things that had happened at home and in Grandfather's village, the quarrels and the ill-feeling, Mother and Grandmother

worrying about the children—now all of this returned vividly to Dushan, and he understood it. And for some queer reason this understanding came as he stood among strangers, came through Ablyaasanov, a man who had no idea that Father and Grandfather even existed. It was as if some of the passions of Dushan's family had collected in the director and now found outlet in this speech, which sounded so odd exactly because it was overlaid with other people's experiences. Once again Grandmother had proved right: invisible links were more durable than visible ones; it was the accustomed and established that broke down, came undone.

And so each person (this dimly, as something not yet realized) carried in him parts of another. The three parts could be put together differently, making three different people. But they would be unlike only in one third; for the rest they would be the same, doubles of one another—like Grandfather going on about the secrets of the fox and the hedgehog: Grandmother's moralizing double. That meant everyone existed not in himself, as a unique personality, but only as part of another. As he grew older, Dushan came to understand all of this (which began here, at the assembly, as a vague inkling) better and better. It made him rather unpleasant for those around him: he could read anyone's character at a glance, almost unerringly.

The assembly on the playing field, Dushan's first, ended as unexpectedly as it began. Suddenly Ablyaasanov made a pause, which went on for so long that he became completely flustered and could not continue. He waved his arm in disgust, and the boys tore off towards the hallway, racing ahead of their teachers. You might have thought that all the while the director was delivering his tirade the boys had been trotting around him in the field, not standing drowsily silent. Dushan, unprepared for such an abrupt transition, was left behind. Once more he overheard a teacher complaining:

"This is really a little excessive—at the Gajivan school we only held assemblies on Saturdays."

"Don't forget, colleague," answered an older teacher, "that boarding schools are a relative innovation. And that in them it is particularly difficult to unite the latest principles of education

with our traditional style of upbringing. We must make experiments, allow ideas to compete—the weaker will with time be eliminated." Apparently he had been at Zarmitan since the day the school opened, and would always defend it jealously. "Like here—no sooner had they separated us from the Tashlak school than they combined us with the orphanage. And they took away the girls, my favorites."

The courtyard became narrower, squeezed on both sides by the brown walls of the classrooms. Dushan was prodded into the narrow stone corridor, which boomed with shouts and laughter. He took a few uncertain steps, and right at the exit into the open spaces of the next courtyard found himself squeezed in from all sides. It became difficult to breathe. A brash, unbridled force seemed to be building at his back. In a moment he would fall, and his body, as if the clothes had been torn from it, would flatten out in a defenseless posture. Dushan did not know yet that the older boys, the ones from the orphanage, liked to amuse themselves this way: almost every evening after the assembly in the third courtyard they penned the younger boys in the corridor and held a shoving match. Ten of the biggest and strongest youths would block off the exit, holding everybody back until the hallway was jammed with boys. Then ten others would surge forward with locked arms. Now Dushan felt the thrust from behind. As he struggled to remain upright he realized that the bodies of his classmates, pressed tightly to his own, made it impossible for him to fall and stretch out on the cold stones of the floor. Just as this thought came to him a shout rose and he was propelled forward with the rest. The boys in front jumped lightly one after another into the courtyard. Dushan, heartened by their agility and the laughs of those who had escaped, was still not able to jump as neatly as the others. In the doorway he tripped over something hard and firmly fixed. As he fell he saw, or rather felt, that two others behind him were also unable to keep their feet. One of them was a boy he knew—Arshak.

Boys ran past laughing into the washroom and the dormitory. It was only when Dushan got up that he felt a sharp pain in his knee. Appak asked compassionately:

"Did you hurt yourself?"

The question comforted Dushan, and he answered as steadily as he could, "No, it's all right."

Dushan and Arshak, the weak, the fallen, exchanged hangdog looks and headed off together for the dormitory. But Appak stopped Dushan, tugging at his arm:

"Remember this spot." He hopped up and down solicitously beside the glum Dushan, pointing to a stump just outside the threshold of the corridor. "When they close off the hallway and push us all out in a crowd, remember about this stump. As you feel the door coming up, count to yourself." (Appak, eager to show off for Dushan, went all the way back to the beginning of the hallway to get a running start.) "One... Two... Three!" And he jumped deftly over the stump. "I've learned a lot here in two months. This is the simplest test, the one they use on newcomers. There are others, harder ones..."

Dushan, embarrassed by so much attention, tried to change the subject: "What about Arshak? Why is he still falling after two months?"

Arshak, who stood listening to their conversation, was stung by Dushan's question. He had expected nothing but sympathy.

"I'm not a greenhorn. I was just daydreaming today, thinking of how I ate honey in a bee-garden once with an Armenian. You're the one who's green—with your bow legs and those funny ears. I'll show you who's stronger..."

"That's enough, Pump," Appak broke in. With remarkable suddenness Arshak turned and ran off to the washroom. As he watched him go, Dushan reflected that "Greenhorn" must be more insulting than "Pump." It meant you were feeble, inept—half the boys at the school would shove you, sneer at you.

"Who gave him that name, 'Pump'?" Dushan asked superciliously. He was thinking that he would not allow himself to be humiliated, even if he never learned to jump nimbly over the stump.

"It's because of a trick he does. He swallows a bellyful of air. You can see it inside him, moving down. Then he lets it all out at once, from behind."

Talking quietly, they came to the dormitory. But just as they

were about to slip in unnoticed Pai-Khambarov, as if he had been waiting for them to appear, looked out the window and motioned for them to go into the washroom. Strange: they had charged ahead of him after the assembly, but he had got to the dormitory before them. He probably had seen Dushan fall, too, but had not intervened. The other teachers also acted as if nothing had happened—just like before the assembly, when they pretended not to see the boys jumping down from the wall into the courtyard.

In the washroom Dushan wandered around for a long time with his basin, looking for a good spot. He was self-conscious in the presence of so many boys. Stripped to the waist—some of them were completely naked—they romped about, pouring water on each other and laughing with pleasure. It was as if they had lived all day in the expectation of this brief time in the evening. The blue door, fastened with a chain, was opened only after they had had their wash; they dashed through and jumped right into their beds.

Mordekhai was also having trouble finding a suitable bench for his basin. He went behind a partition and reappeared beside Dushan, pretending he was drying off. He too must have been conscience-stricken at the thought of going to bed without washing his feet. Dushan waved to him, as if commiserating with a bashful fellow like himself, who would have liked to wash in privacy so the others would not laugh at his thin body. But Mordekhai could not see him through the gray steam.

“Time’s up,” announced Pai-Khambarov. He opened the side door, and the boys dried off quickly and ran into the dormitory. Seeing that Mordekhai had not managed to wash up either, Dushan went to his bed and lay down with a heavy sigh. Appak was whispering to him about something, but Dushan did not listen. He watched Pai-Khambarov making his round, checking whether the boys had folded their clothes properly, whether they had hung their towels at the foot of their beds.

Dushan was afraid that Pai-Khambarov would touch his dry towel and catch him, discover the first lie in his new life, the age of numbers and degrees. Grandmother had said: “A lie

squeezes the heart tighter in the rings of the years it has lived through."

Why had he again remembered Grandmother, with her tedious sayings? It seemed that the spaciousness of the courtyards here, the rough manners of the older boys, the strange speech Ablyasanov had made, Pai-Khambarov's indifference, the washroom—all of this, its vitality and commonplaceness—contradicted and made laugh of her all-knowingness and wisdom, which circled around endlessly with never a fresh breath of the new.

No, he would not think about Grandmother, her cold, dry formulas. He must live for himself, feel and comprehend the truth whole, not receive it as something ready-made. He would be guided by each new day, not the wisdom of another, which bound, confined, and crushed him. More and more Dushan longed to pass through his own mistakes and disappointments, not trusting to the experience of another. Now, in the dormitory, his longing even made him resent Grandmother, rebel against her.

Suddenly it became noisy in the room, and Appak jumped out of bed. After a final appeal to their conscience and sense of decency, Pai-Khambarov had left them alone. Rabbim, the boy on duty, protested weakly, but no one paid him any mind. Boys tossed pillows at one another and crawled around under the beds. Istam mounted on Arshak and rode him like a donkey. As the other boys exclaimed approvingly, he sang:

*Kelina binam-kharaki
Shuyasha binam-piraki.
Yak kurtayu yak izor,
Onesh murat ba ruzosh.**

"Yak kurtayu yak izor," shouted the boys in reply. Some of them pretended to be mules, others muleteers. Then all at once, as if on cue, they fell silent.

* *I see them bringing the bride on a donkey,
I see an old man ready to receive the bride.
Her dowry is only her shirt and trousers.
Death take you, miserly mother of the bride.*

(Tajik)

Startled by the sudden hush, Dushan even thought that Pai-Khambarov must have come back in. But then he heard voices speaking hesitantly, timidly, about the "bicycle". This was a cruel prank the older boys played: wisps of straw were put between a sleeper's toes and then lit. Dushan only half understood. He expected that an argument would start, and then Appak would patiently go through all the details, as he had about the stump. But Appak pulled his blanket over his head, like all the rest.

The very atmosphere of the dormitory had become somber as soon as the "bicycle" was mentioned. But the discussion ended quickly, as if it was feared that if they talked for long about these dreadful things their very words would make the orphange boys appear in the dormitory. Better not to speak of them at all, to be still, to avoid looking at one another, to settle down and go to sleep.

The uneasiness passing from bed to bed through the whole dormitory left only Dushan untouched. He rolled over on his left side and whispered to Yamin:

"Where are you from?"

"From Gajivan--there's a stream there." Before he answered, Yamin had sighed with relief: the silence was oppressive.

Dushan remembered that he had heard one of the teachers talking about Gajivan.

"That's Bolotaliev," said Yamin smugly. "He looks out for me. There were girls in that school. We all slept together."

"It's good to be with girls." Dushan spoke in a whisper, but everyone must have been listening intently to their conversation. Laughter, at first wary but then raucous, came from all corners of the dormitory.

"Dushan likes girls! Dushan likes to be with girls! He must be a girl!"

Finally even Appak overcame his apprehension. He stretched across to Dushan's bed and climbed onto it, poking its occupant in the ribs and biting him playfully on the shoulder. Then the silence fell again. It was as if each outburst of merriment was tiring, artificial; they lay tensely expectant, without squeaks or rustlings, waiting for sleep.

One by one they drifted off. There were snores, arms raised sharply as if to ward off some danger, groans. Only Appak was still awake. He gazed steadily at Dushan, as if he was waiting to confide something in his new neighbor. Finally he whispered:

"If I fall asleep, watch out that they don't put me on the 'bicycle'. Pai-Khambarov is in the recreation room—through that door there. Call for him."

"Go to sleep," Dushan said quietly.

"They're in the first courtyard. If you see their shadows on the window, shout: 'Help! Pai-Khambarov, help!'" As soon as he had said that, Appak fell asleep, comforted. He did not even remember to wish Dushan "Good night."

After dinner, when Dushan had lain down in the bed beside his, Appak had said, "We can say 'Good night' to one another—all right?" It was as if he thought the polite attention of his frail neighbor could protect him against the pitiless tricks of the older boys and drive away bad dreams.

Appak slept. To Dushan's left was Yamin, defended by Botaliev—though it was probably a fib about his having warned everyone to be nice to Yamin. Beyond him lay Mordekhai; the light from the window did not reach his face.

Dushan recalled how he and Mordekhai had stood at the edge of the playing field, choking on the dust. But neither of them had wanted to move away, to go after the ball. Seeing two lizards on the wall, Mordekhai said drolly:

"Both of them are lying belly down. You can't tell which has the stomach-ache."

On the other side of Mordekhai slept Rabbim. He did not really smell bad—Appak had been mean to say so. It was just that the dormitory was stuffy. Probably Rabbim would have slept better where Dushan was: he had wanted that bed, felt drawn to it. Maybe his bodyguard had whispered to him that if he became accustomed to that spot he would grow up. Otherwise he would be a midget, have to work in the circus.

Another sleeper cried out, mumbled something in a language only his double could understand. As if they had been waiting for this signal, others joined in chorus, each in his own key. From the rows of beds came whimpers, groans, chattering like

the speech of monkeys. Could it be that Grandmother was right? When Dushan was having trouble saying “r” she had told Mother to correct him when he talked in his sleep, as if it were at night that speech was born: the garbled words were forged in the depths of the throat, rolled out on the palate by the cheeks and tongue, polished to perfection—the very first words from the mysterious depths, from the ancestral speech. Everyone took words ready-made from the language shared by all, but arrived at them in his own way, formed them of the night-time cryings and moans of his ancestors. Later, when he found his tongue, he would begin to prattle freely.

It was odd: when they asked him to think of words beginning with “r”—“rakkosa,” “rukhs,” “registon,”*—he would unaccountably say “laylak” or “loy,”** as if he could no longer tell the two sounds apart. In the very beginning, when he could only make incoherent cries, he distinguished those sounds in an inner speech, which he alone understood. He even felt angry that the grownups failed to notice this, and were annoyed because now, when he had begun to speak their common language, he found himself to say “r” correctly.

In infancy, when it had seemed that he could say “r” as he spoke in his inner language with the cupboard or the oleander bush, nothing had divided him from the outer world. Only as he grew older did he become aware, through the resistance of this “r”, that his surroundings were something distinct, aloof.

As the time drew near for Dushan to go to school, the grown-ups, in despair, even thought of taking him to the quarter of the city called Sanchi Lesak.*** There was a stone there that the townspeople poured yogurt over. The tongue-tied, when they needed to recite in school or testify in court, would come to lick away the yogurt.

In the happy days when he was one with the world, rejoicing in it, he had not tried to distinguish himself. Once he became conscious of his life as a thing apart, he developed a passion—al-

* *Rakkosa*—dancing girl; *rukhs*—soul; *registon*—city square. Words with the same meaning in Tajik and Uzbek.

** *Laylak*—stork; *loy*—clay (Tajik).

*** *Sanchi Lesak*—Licking Stone.

though short-lived for drawing. In the lines and curves of his simple sketches he tried to express his disquiet: the lines and curves represented the world he had conquered, comprehended, and all of his ignorance, helplessness, and fears were left in the white spaces between them.

Late that night he thought once more of his grandmother, and a sudden wind swirled in the courtyard, sighed just outside the window and was still. Was Grandmother calling to him, reproaching him? Dushan felt ashamed now of his hostility, his rebellion.

Just before bedtime she had always been especially gentle with him. Knowing that he did not sleep peacefully, she would pardon Dushan for all the offenses of the day. Sometimes she even apologized for her strictness. If they had quarreled, she would tell her grandson: "Don't mind me—I'm cold and heartless." As if before the oblivion of the night, the departure into the world of dreams, the cares and frictions of the day were seen to be trifling and needless. Dushan remembered especially one winter evening when a heavy snow had fallen unexpectedly and it had grown warmer in the courtyard.

And now, like a continuation of his shame and his love for Grandmother, who had found fault even with herself, Dushan began to feel how hard it was for him to lie on this strange bed. It was wrong to begin his life among these new people with a petty lie, even if it were removed by his dreams during the night. "Wash your hands!" read a big sign in the courtyard, and another in the washroom. Quietly, feeling his way, Dushan went to wash his feet.

Washing in the morning and the evening was almost a ritual with him now. Sometimes in early childhood he had contrived to come to breakfast without washing his face. At her wits' end, Grandmother had said, "You have no patience or pride in yourself."

"Pride in myself?" Dushan repeated, perplexed. And he had been pleased by her explanation of why you should wash your face carefully in the morning:

"All the troubles of the night, fevers and sleeplessness, are the work of the Devil. If he sees that a person has got the better

of him and gone to sleep, he bends over and spits in the sleeper's face out of spitefulness."

And so at night, when at last he fell asleep, not only his bodyguard but also the Devil bent over him. Not seeing each other in the darkness, they might crack their heads together, and everybody would be alarmed. Was that the reason for those sudden gusts of wind, those noises like thunderclaps? It all happened so fast, so unexpectedly—you opened your eyes and looked around, wondering if you had been awake or dreaming.

When the washroom was full of boys, he had wanted to flee from it, to examine everything in it and get used to it in solitude. But now it felt even more desolate. Dushan halted, thinking that even when the washroom was empty he could not bring himself to wash there. And all at once what had been building up inside him all day overflowed, filling him with bitterness. His breath came hard; he felt there was no way for him to express his feeling, get free of it. With a cry of despair he threw himself against the wall and began to beat it with his fists. Then he slid to the floor and inhaled its smell of mold.

After a while he felt better and sat up. He was weak, and wanted to cry. Ashamed of himself, he went back to the dormitory and got into his bed. Then the side door opened, and Pai-Khambarov came in and bent over him, as if he had seen and heard everything.

"What's the matter?" he asked in a hoarse, sleepy voice.

Dushan felt nothing towards his teacher now: no interest and no rancor. He looked blankly up into his face.

Something in that sullen, penetrating gaze, some inner force, made Pai-Khambarov uneasy. He coughed and touched Dushan's knee beside the hurt spot.

"You fell in the corridor—I know all about it. Don't worry. We have the names of the ones responsible." He looked over the rows of sleeping boys and listened to their murmurs. Before going back to the recreation room he added: "If it bothers you, tell the lady on duty tomorrow."

As soon as Pai-Khambarov had left, Dushan broke down and cried. He himself could not have said why: perhaps it was the thought of the woman who would take pity on him. Just before

he drifted off, he remembered the mantis-woman. Autumn was coming now, and the leaves would be falling from the mulberries in the vacant lot.

*Sun ... wind ... bee
Leaf bends ... shelters there,*

he whispered to himself as he fell asleep.

The next day Dushan had a stomach-ache, but the time passed so quickly despite it that he ran out of the washroom ahead of all the rest and got into his bed, waiting for the teacher who was on duty. And he was not much surprised to see it was the woman whom Pai-Khambarov had chatted with at the assembly. In the words he had spoken ("If it bothers you, tell the lady tomorrow.") Dushan had heard something personal, a closeness between the two teachers. Pai-Khambarov seemed to be saying, "She will make it better—I know her." It was then Dushan had guessed that she would be the teacher on duty.

As soon as she came in there was an uproar. Boys danced around her jumping up and down, grabbed her arm, hugged her. She moved about the room slowly, a large woman with an open, kindly face, straightening the blankets with a proprietary air. After chiding them good-naturedly for the disorder, she asked:

"Who is the new boy here?"

Dushan did not respond right away. He had thought you were only a newcomer for one day—since that morning he had been just like the rest, their equal.

"He is!" Everyone pointed at Dushan, but not accusingly, like the day before. Now they were playful—it was only a harmless joke.

"My name is Aunt Bibisara." She spoke emphatically, as if she were certain Dushan would not be able to remember her name. "How is your leg?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Very well, thank you," she mimicked amiably. "What nice manners you have! Anyone could tell you're from Bukhara. Why don't you lie down and let me take a look?"

"It doesn't hurt, really," said Dushan. He was afraid if he

showed her the bruised place the whole dormitory would crowd around his bed and make fun.

"It won't hurt tomorrow, either," Aunt Bibisara said with conviction, as if she could see clearly into the future. "You're a brave boy. Go to sleep, everybody. We have a big day coming up: we're going to see a kolkhoz farm." There was something touching, sympathetic, in the name she called herself—Aunt Bibisara—and in the way she spoke to them. She made Dushan feel at ease, even though he was still too shy to give her a hug or stroke her hand like the other boys.

"She'll think I don't like her," he thought with a pang.

As soon as she went out the room became quiet, but without the tension Dushan had noticed the night before. The boys must have felt safe with Aunt Bibisara on duty: she was a light sleeper and would not let anyone sneak into the dormitory with burning wisps of straw.

"You talked a little better today," Dushan whispered to Appak. "Your burr smoothed out some overnight."

Appak did not know what he was talking about. He whispered back:

"Don't go to sleep." Lifting himself on one arm, he peered over the rows of beds. "Kamin the Foundling is asleep. Istam is snoring already. Shamil Shorts... What are you muttering for, Mordekhai?"

Mordekhai looked at Appak through half-closed eyes and said:

"A caterpillar doesn't have thorns, but if you step on one it makes you holler. Why is that?"

"You're a coward," said Appak. He stretched over to Dushan's bed and put an arm around his neck.

"He's a binocular, that Mordekhai." Appak could not find the word he wanted. "A snitch, I mean. Big ears and a long tongue."

"Why do you say that? Why are you mad at him?" asked Dushan in surprise.

"He has shifty eyes. Tells the teachers on us."

"But we don't do anything bad. Mordekhai had a stomach-ache—he said something about lizards. He must be afraid of

them," said Dushan, yawning and stretching.

"You don't know anything. One of the older fellows asked if we had snitches in our class. Said he and his friends would fix them. I was lying here thinking whether Mordekhai was one." Appak lay back down on his own bed. In an offended tone, as if he had been caught at something, he said: "There's a lot you don't know yet. You're still new."

But Dushan was no longer listening to him. And when Appak woke him he thought that the dream he had fallen into for a little while was not a dream at all but a continuation of their conversation about Mordekhai. He was puzzled by what Appak said:

"Wake up, they've already started."

"But I wasn't asleep. What are you talking about?" At first he thought Appak was playing a trick on him. Then he dragged himself out of bed and followed the other boy to the side door.

"Lie down." Appak was excited, breathing deeply. He stretched out beside the threshold and pointed to a little hole in the door through which light shone. "Look through here," he whispered.

Dushan put his right eye to the hole, but could not see anything. But his left eye found the spot: the light opened up to reveal the room beyond. Pai-Khambarov and Aunt Bibisara were sitting facing one another, sideways to the door.

Dushan recoiled from surprise and wanted to rush back to his bed. But Appak held him by the shoulders and repeated:

"Watch. They're going to talk now."

Suddenly Pai-Khambarov leaned nearly his whole body over the table, wanting to take Aunt Bibisara's hands in his, but she pushed him away lightly. Then, as if frightened by what she had done, she jumped up and stood next to Pai-Khambarov, who now sat unmoved.

"Don't... I'm married, after all. People will talk." She spoke rapidly, stumbling over her words. "If I could only be sure that you're not joking!"

Pai-Khambarov got up, and they stood side by side: the thin, crafty teacher and the simple, distraught woman. He reached towards her. Dushan could not watch any longer. He hurried back to his bed, afraid that now he and Appak had uncovered

the secret of Pai-Khambarov and Aunt Bibisara they would be caught in the act and punished for their unworthy behavior.

Appak lay beside the door a little longer and then came back. He wanted to tell Dushan about what he had seen, but Dushan interrupted him angrily:

“It’s disgusting! Go to sleep. It’s wrong to do that.”

Suddenly he remembered how he had listened to Mother and Father whispering in the summer room, been frightened and perplexed to find they were not in their own beds. But that had been by accident. He had not expected to see anything of the kind as he crawled after Appak towards the door, had he? But why had he given in to his low, petty curiosity, not closed his eyes in shame?

Dushan thought about Mother, now left by herself, and remembered what she had said once in reply to a jibe from Father:

“I’m not so old, really. Just thirty-three.” Father went out into the courtyard without answering: it was stuffy in the room. Mother continued to lean against the wall, as if her body had grown too heavy for her legs. A dapple of sunlight danced gaily above her, trying to descend to her left eye. A minute later Grandmother’s angry voice came from the courtyard:

“She was pure and good. You wore her out, ruined her. And now you find fault! You’ve made her into a copy of yourself—don’t you like what you see?”

It wounded Dushan to remember that. It was as if Grandmother had berated Father just now, in front of the whole dormitory. But then, as he stood beside Mother in the room, her words had not affected him. Maybe whatever did not touch the emotions, was not felt in its bitterness when it happened, was put away in the memory to be thought over and experienced later, little by little.

Could it be that Nabi-Zade, whom Mother had spoken of so often as “Uncle” as she hurried from office to office, was bothering her now like Pai-Khambarov was bothering Aunt Bibisara? And Mother was trying to recall him to his senses, reminding him she was a married woman?

Dushan tossed and turned. His jealousy kept him from

dropping off to sleep like Appak, who never seemed to be troubled by anything. The jealousy suddenly made them seem very like each other—Nabi-Zade and Pai-Khambarov. Dushan disliked both of them. And he thought that in getting to know Pai-Khambarov he would learn all about Nabi-Zade, Mother's tormentor.

“Poor Aunt Bibisara,” Dushan whispered. He looked at the side door, listened intently. “Go away from him, push him off.”

But later he decided to forget all about what he had seen, so as not to be mistaken about the people here, as he had in his first impression of Ablyaasanov. It seemed that everyone was right in his own way. Everyone must be living differently, in his own small world, trying to do good. Dushan would understand the rest when he was tired and became indifferent to everything. Now even the teacher who had talked about the “corruption of ideas”—Ayyazov—seemed likeable, gentle. The way he had spoken to a boy he had caught running along on top of the wall today:

“You numbskull! Aren’t you ashamed of yourself? Here they’ve given us this fine palace to live in—we should go around all day singing for joy. But instead you break down the walls, bang in the doors, tear long strips of paint off the walls—those are our national designs, did you know?”

The boy had probably been on his way to rob the garden of one of the honored citizens of Zarmitan. He jumped down off the wall and stood before Ayyazov, hanging his head. And the teacher, so angry and indignant just a moment before, began to explain amiably to the boys who had gathered round him:

“I don’t know how to be strict. And you know that, you rascals! You take advantage of me! The very spirit of this place, which has seen such cruelties...” The guilty boy forgotten, he began to tell about the palace of Prince Arif, about the prince’s thoroughbreds and what an excellent groom he, Ayyazov, had been: “We only fed the horses choice oats then—not a single spoiled grain. Now I have to go to all sorts of trouble to get that kind of oats, for kidney tea.”

“The horses didn’t use to have kidney troubles,” said the culprit, eager to keep the topic alive.

Seeing the delighted enthusiasm with which Ayyazov told about all this, Dushan reflected that probably each person cherished two or three truths that were close to him and remembered one or two bits of the past. And to touch on any of these subjects was enough to make him talkative and good-humored. Ayyazov's pet subject was his recollections of the days of Prince Arif. All the other things he thought and argued about--the "corruption of ideas," the algebra he taught--were alive in him only through the existence of his favorite idea.

It was good if the theme around which all conversations revolved for you was not ultimately a false one. Grandmother had told them once, laughing, about Salim, their neighbor. She was sitting in the room for some reason, as if she were being punished. She leaned out the window to talk to them, and her story too was about somebody who was punished:

"For as long as I had known him, fifty years or so, he'd had one favorite saying that he always brought the conversation around to. He liked to astonish people with it. He would say that Moslems aren't really forbidden to drink, and quote from the Koran: 'You may drink until you can no longer distinguish a white thread from a black one.' We listened to him all our lives and admired his learning. But then the nephew of Gaib, the butcher, heard him repeat that. 'Excuse me for correcting you,' he said to Salim--he was still in his teens. 'But the Koran says, "You may eat and drink until a white thread can be distinguished from a black one before you at dawn."'" That's during the fast days, when you are allowed to eat and drink your fill at night. It has nothing to do with getting drunk as a pig. After that no one respected Salim any more, and they stopped inviting him to weddings. He lost the right to be taken seriously."

Bolotaliev, who had argued briefly and courteously with Ayyazov after the assembly, was from Gajivan like Yamin. Dushan thought he understood him too now. Yamin had waited for his countryman in the corridor, and when Bolotaliev appeared had rushed to hug him and brushed off his coatsleeve. Bolotaliev, not wanting to favor Yamin over the other boys, had said:

"Don't cling to me that way. Someone from Gajivan should

be proud, superior in every way to these over-refined, pampered Bukharans. Do you think it was easy to trade my nice warm home for the gallery where I sleep here? But I bear it without complaining—my wife didn't give me any choice." There was so much warmth in this unexpected confession that Dushan immediately forgot his first impression of Bolotaliev, who had seemed haughty and trifling.

Dushan lived through the days peacefully, growing accustomed to the school. Sunday morning Mother and Amon would come for a visit. The excitement and talk about parents began Friday evening. On Saturday some of the mothers came to take their boys home for the weekend. Mordekhai, Istam, Damirali, and Irod went home. Arshak refused to go, saying he was happy at the school. Tears had welled up in his mother's eyes. Before they went to sleep on Friday, Appak told Dushan no one ever came to visit him: he was grown up and could get along without his parents. Dushan was touched by his words, and told Appak how Mother had warned him they would not be able to take him home the first Sunday. There were repairs going on: the grape arbor had been cut down, and the lower square, which had been damaged by heavy rains, was being re-tiled.

"But the week after, it will be like a new home for you," she had said to console him.

Dushan wanted to pretend indifference, but after breakfast, long before the parents began to arrive, he could not resist going out into the first courtyard, to the gate through which they would come. He looked around at the empty courtyard so that he would be used to it, would be at ease there when Mother came. An old woman, somebody's mother, was already standing there forlornly, like a petitioner. Dushan glanced at her and went back, embarrassed, to wander around the second courtyard, which was less disturbing. As he was going back once more to the gates, he learned from the boys who ran past shouting that the old woman was the mother of one of the boys in the upper grades, and that he did not want to see her. She sat with other women under the awning, and the boys looked for her son in the other courtyards. At last caught him in the second

corridor. He had been hiding up among the beams of the ceiling.

"I told you not to come any more. What are you doing here?" he asked sullenly.

She was abashed, and tried to shame her son. Pointing to the other boys, she said: "Look, they're all glad to see their mothers. They're eating good things from home..."

The boy was taken to Director Ablyaasanov for a dressing down. As he waled past he gave Dushan an odd look, as if surprised to see him there among the rest.

Not wanting to seem heartless like that boy, Dushan ran towards Mother as soon as she appeared in the distance. He hugged her, and then sat down between her and Amon. Both of them, Mother and Amon, looked at him expectantly, as if they knew he might be hiding something.

"Are you happy here?" Mother patted him on the shoulder, wanting to bring him out of the drowsiness he had fallen into as soon as he sat down and felt the warmth of her body. "Are you used to it yet?"

"Has anybody been mean to you?" Amon asked menacingly. It was hard for him to sit still; he got up, wanting to seek out the ones who had wronged his brother and give them their deserts. "Remember that the Temuris have never showed cowardice before anyone!"

"No," Dushan said quietly to Mother. "No one is mean to me." And he looked attentively into her weary, gray face; already he was filled with ill-will towards the unknown Nabi-Zade. "How is Father? Has he written?"

"Why do you ask?" The question seemed to startle Mother. "Did you dream about him?" Flustered, she pulled out a cloth bag. "Here—I sewed this for you. We'll put all these good things in it. Share them with your friends. By the way, is Pai-Khambarov around? I wanted to have a talk with him."

"I saw him somewhere this morning," Dushan answered. He was surprised at the familiar way she referred to his teacher, without a trace of deference: not "Uncle Pai-Khambarov", not "Amin Tursunovich", in the modern way. In his presence her manner had been respectful, ingratiating.

One after the other, the teachers came to the awning for

talks with the parents. You could hear them praising their charges; they must have been keeping the bad things for private conversations.

"Let's go and find your teacher," Mother said. And together they went through the courtyards and corridors as they had on the first day. Amon had already joined a soccer game in progress on the playing field. The boys were coated with the dust that hung above them like a shadow.

"Amon likes it here," said Dushan in the hard, emotionless voice he used when he was hurt or upset.

"Yes, he's already made friends with everyone," Mother agreed. "Not like my younger son." Suddenly she seemed alarmed, as if she had unwittingly revealed a secret. "But that's only how it seems. I know—I'm your mother. Amon has no patience, no stability. He would fall apart here, get out of hand. We would lose him. But you will pull yourself together, be better off."

Mother had not talked with him so seriously for a long time. Now she was trying to convince him, make him believe something that was not true. Did that mean that seriousness was always a mask for insincerity, that light chatter—like the way Pai-Khambarov talked with Aunt Bibisara—was where truth lay? Maybe not. Something had come between mother and son since they saw each other last. Dushan seemed different, more grown-up, to his mother.

"Go and play with Amon for a while, and I'll look for Pai-Khambarov," she said. It was as if she had come to the school mainly for the teacher's sake.

Amon had quickly made friends with the other boys, but as soon as he saw his brother standing alone at the edge of the playing field he was infected with Dushan's mood. It was as if he felt everything Dushan had lived through in this new place. He ran to his brother, wanting to embrace him, or poke him in the ribs, trying to cheer him up. He had seen Dushan this way once before—at Grandfather's, after he had beaten him in the orchard. And now it all came back to him, like guilt, here, in the boarding school.

"What's the matter with you? Why are you looking like

that?" Amon asked. "Are you mad at me? What for?" He threw his arm around Dushan's shoulders and kissed him, in front of everyone. "Why are you like this?" he repeated. And suddenly Dushan noticed that Amon was crying, and his heart sank from pity and surprise at such a change—from carefree cheerfulness to bitter tears.

"No, I'm not mad at you." Dushan attempted a smile. "You haven't done anything. What makes you think so?" His brother's tears heartened and consoled him, and he decided that from now on he would not show weakness in any way.

Time passed, and Dushan got used to many things about life at the school, but he still felt it strange that others should call themselves "I". His nature, although it was weak and had not yet fully established its originality, nonetheless protested, sought to defend itself. It often irritated him that Appak or Arshak, relating some incident, constantly thrust forward their "I": "Only I could have jumped across that ditch," or "I would have showed him a thing or two!"

This "I" was so strong when it expressed only one selfhood, so all-embracing and seductively sweet. It did not belong to any of the other boys; it was single and indivisible, like the bodyguard and the double. If it belonged to you alone, "I" could frighten others. It could be sent to trick and avenge. It was enough just to say: "I'll get up now and take a swing..." And the others who wanted to take this "I" for themselves, make it their emissary, advocate, bodyguard, and defender—they were encroaching on Dushan's individuality, his inviolability. They wanted to confine him to "you": "No, Dushan, I wasn't the one who was afraid, it was you," or "I jumped across the ditch, but you were too weak." When Irod said that he was trying to break Dushan's "I", to humiliate him and force him into the ranks of dull, gray, weak boys with no personality of their own.

You had to argue, to resist the pressure exerted by the stronger boys. It was only when he was left alone, in peace, that Dushan felt his "I" to be safe from encroachment. And these were the times when the most interesting ideas were born; only when he was certain of his inner integrity could he understand the world around him, see it clearly, distinct from himself.

Earlier, when he was not jealous of his "I", when he did not feel it, he did not feel the world around him either. He was joined to it in a single whole, and so remained until he began to notice the darkness dividing him from everything outside and to be troubled and frightened by its mysteriousness. The feeling of "I" had been born to defend him, so that he could comprehend that troubling world and overcome his depression and dismay. Fortified by his inalienable "I", he would find it easier to look around him and to understand.

How strange! He had been wiser, more knowing, in his infancy, when the inner and outer worlds had been one. And why had they needed to separate afterwards, making him ashamed of his own unperceptiveness? In that first age, joyful, mischievous, and dreamy, he had lived like a lily of the field, like a bird of the air, demanding nothing and feeling embarrassment before no one. Perhaps the world around him, in revenge for his magnanimous lack of desires, had begun to draw away from him, so that he must strive to know it and grasp it once more. But why this new, second acquaintance with everything, when it had all been his the first time, even though unconsciously, through feelings alone? Why should he withdraw again, torment himself with doubtful guesses, when once already, when he was inside his mother's womb, everything inside and outside him had come together, the disturbing questions seemingly forgotten for that time, so that he might be born and grow in quietude, lulled by silence, clarity, and simplicity, the deepest understanding?

Now that his personality and the world around him stood opposed to one another, and the outer world tried him, crushed him, those unmediated perceptions of the world had departed, given way to mental, intellectual understanding—perhaps the most deceptive, unreliable kind of knowledge. Was ignorance not the source of his suffering, of this desire to divide and distinguish so he might regain the whole that had been lost forever through its parts, through recollections of the past, and through comparison of himself with others?

And the first thing he compared when he had become a little accustomed to life at the school was the courtyards—his own

and the one here, Prince Arif's. Earlier, when the past had not been marked off from the present, when time flowed uninterrupted, Dushan had been unaware of the weight of the days he had lived through. But once, just as he was falling asleep, Appak whispered to him: "Do you have memories, Dushan? I mean something you think about most of all?" That question was like the last step, the last glimpse: now he saw time as something divided.

In those days he remembered his own courtyard most often in quiet times. Father stood in the front garden holding a spade. There was a blue spot on the handle where the wood had cracked. Dushan thought about the spade, trying to recall its details—another thing belonging to his home. That could keep his spirits up: he could not remember anything but the cracked place with its spot of paint.

"Appak was right," thought Dushan. "To think is to remember. You can't think about something if it hasn't been part of your life. Your thinking won't do any good."

And he thought about the day when the courtyard suddenly opened itself to the outsiders who had come to pay their respects to Grandmother. It was noisy and gray with dust then, surprisingly like the courtyard of the boarding school, which seemed to be a continuation of the one at home as it was on that day: bustling and bleak, its secrets divulged. What had been given to him, and in what order? Had Grandmother's death been meant to show him his own courtyard in the guise of the school's, so that he could come to terms in advance with his future life? Or could it be Grandmother's death had no bearing on his fate, and he would have been sent all the same to live in the courtyard of Prince Arif, whose secrets seemed to have been driven away by some sort of curse?

It was thus, in comparing courtyards, that Dushan came to feel time as divided into the past and the present. (The past was memory, which forced you to think.) And this was another important step in his growth, in the transition from childhood to youth, when the present is something troubling, requiring constant inquiry. Even Dushan's appearance, his absurdly long and disproportionately thin body and his angularity, was an expres-

sion of this inner struggle and change. This sense of the time he had lived through was something he greatly needed, a consolation. Finding it hard to get along with others, Dushan was forced to seek comfort in the past. His memory selected for him all that was best; the unpleasant, wounding things he tried to forget as quickly as possible. Once he had made others laugh with stories about himself as a boy of five or six. Now his memories of that time were among his most precious possessions.

But later, thinking about Grandmother's death, Dushan realized that the past and the present, however separated, could still act on one another. The two lay side by side, and through some unexpected passage a distant and already forgotten day from the past might suddenly appear in memory, coming into the present down through other, less important days. The day of Grandmother's death, for instance, which had opened up, orphaned their courtyard, had come to this place, passing by thousands of other courtyards to show its astonishing likeness to the courtyard of Prince Arif.

"If Grandmother were alive, they would never have sent me here," Dushan often reflected. And so the death of someone near to you was more than a loss. It also predetermined something in your life, some day in the future when an abrupt change would take place. But why was it that now, after so much time, he felt Grandmother's death more sharply, more painfully, while all that she had said and done while alive seemed farther away? Was it because her death had altered his fate more than her life, than all those long years? Afterwards the outside world had moved away from him again, made him once more acutely aware of itself.

Dushan also remembered another sensation—curiosity. Not pain at his loss, not grief, but an interest in Grandmother's death as something new, uncomprehended. He had been simple-hearted then. The past and the present were not so sharply distinguished in his mind, and time ran on almost unperceived, through the change of colors and half-tones on the grape vine in the courtyard, on the oleander, in the thick dust that hovered in the sunlight.

The colors—red to gray. A gust of wind would wipe them away, and the yellow would come after the rain. Some colors faded and others disappeared forever. Only those two—blue and green—were repeated all around, passing through the cold of winter, the yellowness of *Shavvala*,* the month after Ramazan, and peeping through the snow that covered the front garden. It seemed nature divided time in its own way. The divisions people had created were wearisome, admitting of no return. But nature's time repeated itself in the green and the blue—the color of heaven—uniting the past and the future through the present. Those colors were always calm, no doubt because they knew that only they could waken thoughts of eternity in people. It must have been after looking at blue and green that Grandmother had criticized herself for her inability to show greatness before eternity, which had deceived her.

“Oh, how life deceived me! It lured me to itself out of the darkness, and while I was warming myself in its glow it never told me that some day it would end. And when I realized I had been caught by life, deceived, it was already too late. And the chill crept over me again.”

But he had also heard Grandmother find fault with herself for not being able to live so splendidly that life itself would give way before her. Her ideas clashed and contradicted one another, as if each of them had two opposing sides, and Grandmother had seen both, sure that every truth contained within it a lie.

Green and blue—those were the colors of eternity, which Grandmother had cursed for its coldness and inaccessibility. The other colors—black and white and yellow—belonged to every day. These were the colors that had lulled Grandmother with their triviality, their easily guessed secrets. Black was the color of earth, of the raging bull Dushan had seen on the way to Zarmitan. The faces of all the boys were black—the color of manliness. But it was a changeable color, oppressive and unreliable. You could see by Appak's** name that his parents had wanted to deceive the color black.

* *Shavvala*—the month of October.

** *Appak*—snow white.

Dushan remembered the way Appak had laughed at his name the first time he heard it. One evening just before they went to sleep he whispered to his neighbor:

"Why did they give you such a funny name—Appak—when you're blacker than soot?"

"A heavy snow was falling, everything around was white," explained Appak with a yawn. "Yes, I'm black. A sword is black you know—a very sharp sword. And a woman is white, and blackness subdues her."

"White means a lot too," Dushan said, not knowing how better to express what he had remembered: at Grandmother's funeral the women had been dressed in white, and for a long time afterwards Mother had worn a white dress.

White was the color of the child-bearing mother. And the color of mystery: when you could not sleep the darkness had a white glow to it, and sorcerers, before removing sickness or the pangs of love, put on a white glove—it was the "white hand" which could work wonders. And so everything mysterious, birth and death, sleeplessness and the color of the moon, bore the sign of whiteness. Black was the color of everyday.

Did everything black have only a single meaning? Were all those things called different names only to distinguish them externally? A black bull, for example, might be called a shadow, or a storm cloud, or even night.

"Such a huge, angry bull was standing in the road, Appak. And it charged at the car like a thunderhead."

"I wouldn't have been afraid," Appak replied. Again he was thrusting forward his "I." "I would have shooed him away like a crow."

And so a bull could be called a crow too, if you wanted to show contempt for his strength and fury. A bull was black like a crow.

Dushan thought about that secret meaning of black on the day he was punished—he who usually was reticent and avoided noisy games. He had run out of the classroom at recess time with the other boys crowding at his back and then stood aside to watch them play leap-frog at the threshold: the first boy squatted down, and the next ran up behind and hurdled over his

back, and so one after the next. The boys hopped nimbly, laughing and excited. Dushan saw Appak make one bold jump; he seemed to be rejoicing in his own agility. Then his face flashed by again, bold and sassy. His every action held so much beauty, skill, and allure. Suddenly, without even realizing what he was doing, Dushan rushed up to him just at the moment when Appak had hopped across ten boys' backs and squatted down like a frog, trembling with impatience. Dushan jumped, but clumsily: he fell onto Appak's back, and the two rolled onto the ground in each other's arms.

"Pile up! Pile up!" shouted the boys. They threw themselves onto the fallen pair. It all happened so fast that Dushan did not even have time to be frightened.

Appak was trying to get up, shoving the boys aside, kicking them mercilessly. Dushan was suffocating at the bottom of the heap. Appak would get away, he thought, but he himself would remain lying there until Pai-Khambarov came, and the teacher would see how clumsy he was.

At last Appak got to his feet and began to rain blows right and left, shouting:

"Don't you dare squash him like that! Don't you dare!" And he thrust the other boys away, trying to help Dushan up. But misjudged, or maybe somebody gave him a shove from behind. He reached out his hand, and Dushan pulled himself up and even managed to run as far as the stairs by the classroom door. But he was still off balance, and slipped: he tried to catch himself, grabbed hold of the banister, but then fell again.

Seeing him once more on the ground, the boys did not throw themselves on him in a heap. They headed into the classroom in a strange silence, as if now that Dushan had fallen a second time they were sated with their roughhousing.

Dushan stood for a little while wondering if he should go into the second courtyard. Then he saw Pai-Khambarov heading for the classroom; he was surprised that in all the commotion he had not heard the bell.

Appak was holding the two halves of a ball, showing them to Dushan. He was about to say something, but when he saw the teacher coming quickly threw the pieces into the sand.

"What is it?" Dushan asked, puzzled.

"A marble ball from the staircase—it cracked," whispered Appak. By the way he said that, Dushan understood that he must have knocked the ball off as he fell. Yes, he had grabbed something smooth, wanting to catch himself, but it had slipped out of his hand.

During the lesson Pai-Khambarov noticed that Dushan was inattentive and gave him a warning. But Dushan could not concentrate on his work. He was trying to remember. He had run past those two balls hundreds of times as he went from class to class—they were ornaments affixed to the banisters of the stairway leading up to the gallery. He had touched them, admired them, but now in his agitation he could not recall what color they were.

Finally he could not bear it any longer, and wrote a note to Appak: "What was the ball like?" For the first few days the two of them had sat together, but now Appak had been banished to the back row for his constant chattering. "It was black, of course," Dushan realized. At that very moment the door squeaked, and he looked up: he was not a bit surprised when Ablyaasanov came in holding the two halves of the ball.

The boys rose from their seats, following the example of the surprised and disconcerted Pai-Khambarov. He looked at the director as if to say: "I can't get used to the way you come in without knocking, and just at the most critical point in the lesson."

Ablyaasanov prolonged the silence triumphantly, certain that the boys' glances would point out the culprit to him. When they all looked at Dushan, he asked:

"Which of you is Dushan Temuri?"

Dushan came out of the row of desks without answering. His willingness to admit his guilt silently, without fear, did not seem to please Ablyaasanov much. The director stamped his foot and ordered, "Come along to my office."

It was only when Ablyaasanov and Dushan were already going out the door that Pai-Khambarov broke down and asked, more of his class than of the director:

"May I ask what happened? Nothing fatal, I hope?"

But the door had already closed. Ablyaasanov led Dushan across the third courtyard to his office. Dushan did not even glance at the banister, at the one black ball remaining. He only thought: "What will they do with the broken one—glue it back together? Or will they take the other one off too?" He did not know what would happen to him now, how he would explain the accident. "I'll tell them that Mother will pay for it," he decided.

This was the first time Dushan had been summoned to the director's office, and like all the boys who had never been there he was afraid of it, although those who already faced the director in his office came back bragging, flaunting their bravery. Appak had been four times since Dushan came to the school, and each time he came back acting as if he had won over the director, overcome him and outshouted him. He told Dushan there was nothing to fear if Ablyaasanov should call him in to answer for some misdeed.

And indeed the office turned out to be just an ordinary room, with a single table and several chairs. There were no portraits or slogans on the damp, gray walls. Ablyaasanov must have felt the dampness deep in his bones: before sitting down he wrapped a plaid blanket around the small of his back. Now he was ready for an unhurried talk. He lowered himself into an armchair and fidgeted a little more: a corner of the blanket had got twisted and he could not sit comfortably. He sat Dushan beside the wall and lay the halves of the black ball before himself. For a long time he examined them intently, as if he could not understand how the hard stone, marble, could have been broken by the touch of Dushan's weak hands.

Dushan saw puzzlement and regret in the director's glance, and this gave him courage. It seemed that the beginning of the conversation would not be at all stern or official. Dushan was as bewildered as the director. He hoped that because of the similarity of their moods he would get off easily.

"You did this?" Ablyaasanov asked listlessly. He did not look at Dushan, as if it were hard for him to talk about such unpleasant matters.

"Yes," Dushan answered firmly. He watched as Ablyaasanov

put the two halves to one another; he seemed to be looking for the jagged line along which they had cracked.

"I knew that it was you." There was vexation in his voice, but Dushan thought that the source was not what he had done but the two halves of the ball, which did not seem to want to fit together again. This made Ablyaasanov nervous, and he was deeply and seriously disquieted, as he had been at the assembly on Dushan's first evening in the school.

"Why is it you don't ask who told me?" he said in a surprised voice. And for the first time since he began to fumble with the ball he looked at Dushan, squinting.

"I don't know," Dushan answered. He felt completely at ease now and was already thinking how he would amaze the other boys with his account of his fearlessness in the director's office. He could not imagine, really, how Ablyaasanov knew; it occurred to him that one of the boys must have told him.

"You are aware, Dushan Temuri, that this ball was an ornament on the stairway leading up to the gallery where the teachers live. Your teachers," Ablyaasanov spoke listlessly again now—he had put the halves of the ball aside. "The people who are educating you, giving you their knowledge, intelligence, and experience, men who are often ill, but nevertheless continue with their work."

The tone he was using now and his long phrase alarmed Dushan, and he waited anxiously to pronounce his saving: "But there's no helping it now. I'm sorry. My mother will pay for it."

"This ball was part of the stairway, and the stairway is part of the courtyard, as the courtyard is part of the school. And if today we break this ball, tomorrow we may knock down the wall, and then it will be easy to pull apart the whole school. But fortunately, for every vandal there are ten, a hundred honest boys who are willing to expose his crimes, to come to me with the names of the guilty."

There were several things in this heartfelt speech which were unconvincing—Dushan had no intention at all, for instance, of knocking down the wall. He wanted to point this out, but did not know how to put it, and so he said simply: "I'm

“sorry. It was an accident.” And realized as he said it that his excuse sounded feeble.

“You admit your guilt?” Ablyaasanov wanted to remove every shadow of doubt.

“Yes,” said Dushan readily.

Ablyaasanov nodded approvingly, and adjusted his blanket. Then he asked accusingly:

“But are you willing to expose the misbehavior of others? What are you doing for your school? How long have you been here—a year? Two? It’s time that you developed a sense of group responsibility, my boy. You ought to keep your eyes open, watch out for anyone who destroys school property, gossips about the teachers, or teases the younger boys, and tell me about it, or your class’s teacher. Who is your teacher?”

“Amin Tursunovich Pai-Khambarov,” said Dushan meekly.

“Yes, Amin Tursunovich... But it would be better to tell me,” Ablyaasanov said evenly. He did not want Dushan to guess his low opinion of Pai-Khambarov, with whom he disagreed on questions of education. “Are we agreed?”

Dushan was about to nod vaguely or answer the question in some other way. But then he remembered what Appak and the older boys thought of the ones they called “snitches”, and how they beat them in the corridors or in the pile-ups during games of leap-frog. He kept silent.

“If we are agreed, you may return to class.” Ablyaasanov squirmed impatiently in his chair. “You can tell the other boys your mother will pay for the ball, so they won’t know about our understanding.”

“I... Of course... I know it’s wrong,” Dushan sensed that now Ablyaasanov would be angry, indignant. After all, he had wanted to be kind, to overlook Dushan’s misdeed. “But I like being alone. They all play together, but I don’t like to... And I don’t know when they do something wrong.”

“You ought to play with the rest, don’t set yourself apart. Almost all of the boys come to tell me when some mischief is afoot. You’re the only one who is holding back. If you will come to me too I can feel sure that I have an eye on all my dear boys.”

Dushan understood that now it would be impossible to refuse by giving some indefinite half-answer. He said:

"No, I can't tell on the others. But it's my fault about the ball, I'm sorry."

Ablyasanzov looked at Dushan with surprise and pity, as if thinking of all the consequences his refusal would have. Then he went to the window and tapped on the pane to get the attention of one of the older boys who was running by:

"Ask Amin Tursunovich to come to my office."

The boy was startled by the tapping, but when he heard the director's unthreatening request he ran off eagerly. Dushan watched unblinking as the boy hurried to the door of the classroom. A silence had fallen; Ablyasanzov was fumbling with the halves of the ball. Dushan saw Pai-Khambarov, wearing a displeased look, headed for the director's office along the same path that the obedient messenger had taken.

As soon as Pai-Khambarov appeared on the threshold Ablyasanzov began to shuffle the papers on his desk, as if he were in a hurry to conclude this conversation:

"The guilty boy, Dushan Temuri, must work off the thirty roubles' damage he caused to the school in breaking the ball. We have a leaky water pipe under the left corner of the playing field the water often seeps out to the surface, and there is a loss of pressure in the kitchens. Measure out a distance of two meters for him, and let him dig down half a meter. He can return to class when the work is finished. It's an honor for you to begin the digging, do you see?" He turned to Dushan with a friendly smile, as if the two of them had decided on this task as the lightest punishment for him.

"But... Why the digging? I object to the use of such measures," said Pai-Khambarov. "And how did you determine that the ball is worth exactly thirty roubles?"

"What idea have you, young man, of the value of the old?" The director made a stride in Pai-Khambarov's direction. "That marble ornament is an antique, priceless. It is valued at thirty roubles in our inventory, a purely nominal figure!"

Pai-Khambarov retreated into a corner, looking uneasily from the director to Dushan and back. Finally he realized that the

mute witness to this clash between himself and Ablyaasanov ought to be removed.

"Wait for me outside, Dushan."

Dushan left the office. He stood for a while just beyond the door, recovering from Ablyaasanov's sudden decision. Then he went off to the corner where he had been sentenced to dig. The boys in his class shouted and whistled to him: all of them were eager to know what Ablyaasanov and Pai-Khambarov had talked to him about.

Dushan knew the place where the water leaked up out of the corroded pipe. If the ground at the edge of the field dried up, crusted over with salt, it meant that the Zarmitan was not giving the school enough water. When there was plenty of water it bubbled up to the surface, and the boys held it back with sand, chasing their ball across the puddles.

Pai-Khambarov did not come out for a long time. He and Ablyaasanov must have been having another of their arguments about methods of education. The boys knew that their teachers were divided into those who favored free, traditional methods—this group was headed by Ablyaasanov—and the progressives, led by Pai-Khambarov, who wanted to give their pupils a modern European education, which put more emphasis on moral development, appealed to the boys' conscience, their spiritual side—or so it seemed to them. Ablyaasanov's supporters, who were all local men, living comfortably in their old-fashioned houses with gardens in the little town of Zarmitan, looked down on the "book worms", whom they accused of being out of touch with life, of wanting to make the boys into effete intellectuals, cut off from their own language and customs. The traditionalists thought the boys should be taught to work, to respect hard-earned money. Pai-Khambarov and the other "book worms" were strangers in Zarmitan, outsiders, pioneers who put up with the hardships of the school's drafty galleries, where they lived. At the beginning of each new school year they expected that Ablyaasanov would at last be replaced by a new director—a progressive, of course—and when he appeared once more in his invariable white suit (whose jacket somehow suggested a military uniform) and narrow black acetate tie, with a medal

pinned to his lapel for the solemn occasion, and opened the meeting of teachers and pupils, at which the cook, the laundress, and the groom were also present, the "book worms" grumbled among themselves, saying that he was a man with little connection to education, himself without any particular attainments, who had worked as a bookkeeper and a horse-breaker at the local stud farm and was only tolerated at the school for the services he had once done—it seemed that he, a Tatar who knew the local language, had been a translator in the forces that drove Prince Arif out of Zarmitan. It was odd that people still remembered about Ablyaasanov's being a Tatar: in his looks, manners, and way of life the director had long since ceased to differ in any way from the local people.

While Dushan stood waiting beside the wall, the watchman and the cleaning woman hurried through the courtyard looking for the key to the shed where the shovels were kept. Then the groom came out, half asleep. Dushan had seen him outside only twice in all his time at the school: once bringing a load of rock-salt past the gates of the boarding school, probably for sick horses at the stud farm in Zarmitan, and a second time with a load of coal. That time he did not go past the school, as Dushan was expecting, but turned and entered its gates, sitting erect and strangely haughty in the box, and his cart clattered off to the fuel shed in the first courtyard. Except for those two occasions Dushan had never seen him anywhere but in the shed, asleep. Sometimes the boys would peep in at him through a crack; it was said that not even the director dared to wake him, fearing the groom's evil tongue.

The groom found a shovel for Dushan and measured out the two meters for him carefully, as if he took pleasure in doing it. As he was leaving he said:

"I enjoy watching other people work—it's so restful. You dig, boy. I'll be watching you from the shed, thinking what a fine fellow you are."

Dushan looked innocently back at the groom and nodded. He felt calm and self-assured, remembering how hard he had worked digging in the front garden with Father and Amon. He wanted to get started right away.

On his first attempts the shovel struck at an angle, scooping up hardly any of the damp, loose earth. Dushan tried hard to collect all of his strength and dexterity. He did not even notice when Pai-Khambarov emerged after his quarrel with the director.

"Don't worry, we'll set everything right! We'll straighten out the kinks in his workaday methods!" Pai-Khambarov hurried off to his classroom. As soon as he had gone, Ablyaaasanov appeared at his office window. He was evidently satisfied with what he saw out in the courtyard.

For the first ten minutes or so Dushan worked with such enthusiasm that he did not even notice it when the shovel bounced up and hit him in the leg. He was surprised at how simple and easy it was to do this work, which had been given to him as a punishment.

Grandmother had punished him too, for his children misdemeanors, had forbidden him to go out into the street. Mother would slap his hands in anger when he came to the breakfast table without washing up. Dushan remembered too one winter day when Father had driven him and Amon up onto the roof and given them wooden shovels with which to throw the snow down into the front garden. Amon had caught cold and was bedridden for a few days, but Dushan, the sickly brother, had not suffered: probably because the work itself was a novelty and the sight of the white roofs with their fluffy, ephemeral cloak of snow had delighted him so. If it had not been for Amon's illness and the quarrel it occasioned between Mother and Father, he would have simply forgotten that as a punishment.

The clayey soil stuck to his shoes, but Dushan did not feel the wetness yet. He was warmed by the thought that he must be strong, must pass this test so that in the future his spirit would not sink in the face of other, more severe punishments. He would stand firm, not showing weakness before anyone, and follow the dictates of his conscience. No one could force him to stoop to what was base, and his stubbornness would win him the respect both of the boys who were watching him dig through the classroom windows and of the teachers.

At recess boys came from all the courtyards to watch Du-

shan. Appak wanted to help him, but a cough came from the shed and the groom swung a length of rope on which he was about to lie down warning him away. Dushan was afraid that the boys would make fun of him, and was relieved that no one seemed to think his punishment was worthy of comment. The boys approached in silence and looked indifferently into the pit he had dug—it must not have been the first time they had seen one of their schoolmates swinging a shovel in proud solitude, working off his guilt while everyone else looked on.

Pai-Khambarov led a delegation of teachers to the edge of Dushan's pit, and Aunt Bibisara moved uneasily about in the neighborhood where he was working. But Dushan had decided he would not pay these visitors any mind. He glanced only once at them, and was surprised to see Bolotaliev among the sympathizing teachers: he had seemed so grave and aloof with Amin, who was from Gajivan too. Kushakov, the physics teacher, was with them also—an impassive man who never had anything to say for himself. Bessarab, the physical-education teacher, and Serdolyuk, the military instructor, stood a little apart; they were more interested in the wall under which the pipe was leaking than in Dushan's plight. The two were practically inseparable: both were bachelors and strangers to Zarmitan; they even shared a room. They were wary of committing themselves either to the progressives or to the traditionalists, since they were unfamiliar with the local language and customs. As a result both parties regarded them with misgivings.

As soon as the other boys returned to class, Dushan began to feel that his arm was tired. The small of his back was hurting. But a third of the digging was already done, and he decided to get the ditch half finished before taking a break. The groom was still lounging by the door of the shed. Seeing Dushan's determination, he called encouragement to him from time to time:

“Make it wider, my liver. It will be easier to clear the pipe that way.”

Dushan smiled, and the open, slightly abashed look on his face also pleased the groom, from whom “my liver” was the tenderest of endearments: that was how he spoke to his horse.

"What was it you were about to say?" said the groom. He stretched out the rope and sat down; this was the first occasion in a long time that he had been interested in talking to someone.

"I like the way you say 'my liver,'" explained Dushan. He straightened his back and leaned on the shovel handle. "It's funny."

"Oh, that!" laughed the groom, although he had not said anything humorous to Dushan—he was just putting himself in the proper mood for a conversation. "Didn't you know that all of a person's love is in the liver?"

"Yes, my grandmother read something to me about that from her old ... book of wisdom."

"That's why people drink bitter things—to spoil their livers. But I don't drink—I'm the only one who can still love."

"You? Who is it you love?" Dushan asked. He had adopted the groom's bantering tone. "I've never seen you talking to anyone but your horse."

Suddenly the groom became angry, and once more put on the haughty air he had worn as he sat in the wagon box. He waved his hand at Dushan:

"I love in silence—in suffering." He got up and brought the two halves of the ball out of the shed. Banging them together, he glared at Dushan as if he regretted having broken his rule of silence, having opened his heart to the boy. "Well, get on with it! We'll see who finishes first."

Dushan became absorbed in his task once more, feeling new strength after his short rest and the strange talk with the groom. Someone came up close to him for a look, but Dushan did not even raise his eyes. It must have been a pupil who had been sent out of class.

The groom was busy with something at the other end of the courtyard, beside the ill-starred staircase. Dushan glanced at him several times, but could not make out what he was doing. Finally he straightened up to take a deep breath and saw that the groom, usually so torpid, was fussing nervously with the ball.

"He's putting it back," Dushan realized. And for some reason he took a malevolent pleasure in the thought that the groom would not have any luck: after all, he had already paid for the

damage with his work. Whatever the ball had represented in Ablyaasanov's mind was now expressed, although in greater volume and dimensions, by this pit. It could not be that the pit was dug and the ball replaced next to the other one: that would mean that Dushan had been tricked, that he was digging when he was not guilty of anything.

After each swing of his shovel Dushan looked at the groom. And the groom, having put the ball into a steel mounting, looked back at the boy with a smug expression. They winked at one another as if they were rivals in a competition: which of them was more clever.

"Well, my friend, it's holding firm!" the groom suddenly announced in a triumphant voice. Dushan was surprised not so much by the replacement of the ball as by that voice: it was as if the feeling that the groom had been holding in for a long time had burst forth, as if the ball itself had knocked that heartfelt, infectious shout of satisfaction from him. Before Dushan had time to feel glad or disappointed, the groom began to drive him away from his task.

"That's enough of pecking at the ground like a sparrow, come away now! The ball was frightened by these hands of gold, and stood right back up there beside its brother, at attention! Just as if the old prince himself were about to come in." He moved to take the shovel away from Dushan, to carry it back to the shed.

"No—I was told to dig three meters," Dushan said, looking at the windows of the office and of his classroom.

"And I was told to take pity on you!" the groom said gruffly. Dushan understood from his tone that there really was such an agreement between him and Ablyaasanov: to send the culprit back to class if the ball could be replaced.

"No!" Dushan objected. He was disappointed at not being allowed to finish. He had imagined himself standing beside the ditch, the conqueror, pointing at the exposed, leaking pipe.

Only after he gave up the shovel did he feel how his blistered palms were hurting. He did not know how to keep his dignity now. In his confusion and embarrassment he suddenly brought out:

"Islam Sabirovich Ayyazov was a groom too once." As if he wanted to reproach the man he was talking with.

"Yes, he was," the groom replied with an angry readiness. He motioned for Dushan to come with him. "Let's sit together for a little while, my liver. The director's gone home to eat. He suffers from a strange disease—has to eat every two hours. It must be because of his hungry childhood." They reached the threshold and Dushan stopped, choking on the mousey odor of the shed. "Yes," the groom continued, "my father-in-law was Prince Arif's groom. In the year the prince ran away, Ayyazov married me to his daughter. Oh, a snake she was, peace be with her! And once I was his son-in-law, he said to me: 'You take my job now, and I'll work as a teacher.' I trusted him, and took the job, and ever since then he's been a teacher and I've been a groom. Go on now! My tongue has got loose again you're the only one I allow myself to talk with. We worked at the same job from different ends, and both of us were tricked. The ball is back where it was, and the ditch is dug too. That's what they call a freak of nature."

"But the ball is cracked," Dushan said stubbornly. "I didn't work for nothing."

"I don't know it might have been cracked. But I can't see anything wrong with it now. And the ditch is half-dug that's the funny thing," he concluded, shutting the door. He seemed to be tormented by this riddle: How could the digging be done when the ball was in its place too?

Dushan had waited impatiently for evening, for the hour everyone went to bed and pulled the blankets over their heads. And after lying that way for a little while to warm up, they would all start to talk again at the same instant, asking about the things that had happened during the day. He was more than a little surprised that no one had any questions for him it was as if no one knew he had been punished, had worked for two hours beside the wall. It was probably just that none of the others was concerned by what had taken place. Dushan had suffered through it alone, expecting commiseration and praise. This may have been the only time he wanted to be in the center of attention: after all, he had refused to promise what Ablyasa-

nov had asked, had stood his ground. But everyone turned away from him, withdrew under their blankets. Dushan tossed from side to side in irritation. His feet felt cold. Only Appak seemed to understand; he said in a loud voice, so that the others would hear:

"I promise you, Dushan, I'll find the one who told on you. And I'll shove his face into the dirt, like a slobbering donkey!"

"Go to sleep. Forget about it," said Dushan in an injured voice. Appak's words had not made him feel better: now the chill from his feet was running up his backbone.

He breathed into his hand that was how he always checked whether he had a fever. His breath was hot, and as soon as he felt it and realized that he was ill the heaviness seemed to pass from his body, which had been straining and aching. He became numb, and started to tremble.

Already he was panting, could not take a deep breath. His weakening, feverish body seemed to be weightless. He could not lie still in his bed. Trying to find a comfortable position, he rolled over and over. It was as if the door were wide open and the right of the dormitory had been removed, so that his bed stood right at the spot where the cold blew in from two directions off the courtyard, which now seemed huge and comfortless in Dushan's mind.

"I should pull myself together," he thought. "There's nothing to be scared of." He remembered the way Mother and Grandmother had talked to him when he was ill. "I wonder why I feel so terribly hot inside, when it's so cold? Maybe all the warm air from everybody breathing under their blankets has collected inside me. So much warmth, and I'm little. The warmth has condensed, and now it's hot." He was already thinking like a physicist: a promising pupil for Kushakov.

"But then it ought to be that I'm not the only one who feels cold here," he reasoned further. "They're all asleep and can't feel anything. Nobody knows I'm ill. Mother, maybe has she cried out in her sleep? No, she doesn't know either. The last time she was here she said I had grown so that I was like a stranger to her. I'll die, and in the morning everyone will gather round to stare."

The very thought of having to turn over and reach his arm out from under the blanket to nudge Appak made Dushan shiver all over.

"Appak," he whispered. He knew that Appak was a light sleeper, could wake up easily at any hour of the night with a pleased expression on his face, as if he were completely rested. Dushan, unable to shake off his morning grogginess, had watched enviously as Appak jumped out of bed full of life and mischief. The daytime gladdened and aroused him; the night, the time of dreams, seemed on the contrary to tire him.

"Appak," Dushan called again. He did not suspect that he could be heard in the recreation room, where Aunt Bibisara was. The side door opened quietly and in the dim light from the next room her full, slow-moving figure appeared.

Dushan had known that Aunt Bibisara was on duty that night, and that she would come at once if he called. But he did not want to disturb her. Everyone would think it was just because he had worked with a shovel for a little while in the courtyard. Appak was the only one Dushan wanted to know about his fever: he would give Dushan courage, and everything would be all right. But if Aunt Bibisara found out, Pai-Khambarov would know too. Dushan was sure that his teacher was sitting even now in the recreation room strikingly handsome, self-confident, and insistent in his attentions. Aunt Bibisara, still not knowing if he were making fun of her, or simply being wanton, was confused and disconcerted. The boys said that Pai-Khambarov's advances had become known outside the school. Rumors were passing through Zarmitan. Aunt Bibisara's husband, who worked as a tally-clerk at a hide factory, had thrown a fit of jealousy, like in an old-fashioned novel. And they said that his wife, usually so gentle and easy-going, had suddenly turned on him and accused him of pettiness and low thoughts. She had not betrayed the secret, and not renounced it: she was caught up completely in the game. The thought that the most attractive man at the school was courting her was exciting. And now if Pai-Khambarov had failed to appear at eleven sharp to entertain her in the recreation room on a night

when she was on duty she would have thought her life empty and purposeless.

Dushan saw that Aunt Bibisara was approaching with cautious, stealthful steps. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, she was already going back through the half-open door, satisfied that all was calm in the dormitory.

And suddenly Dushan was troubled by the thought that now she would go away until morning and no one would help him. Aunt Bibisara would go back into the recreation room and say softly to Pai-Khambarov: "All quiet, they've gone to sleep." And then she would stay with him beyond the door, content, excited—it was their contentness, their isolation from everything else in the world, that disturbed Dushan.

"Aunt Bibisara," he whispered. He reached his arms out from under the blanket, lifted them up so she could see them in the light coming through the door. She heard him at once and came to his bed, sensing why he had called her. With a worried look she bent over him and touched his forehead with her lips. She knew how to keep calm at such times: feeling the boy's fever, she said reassuringly:

"Yes, you have a little temperature, but it will be all right." But she was unable to keep up the pretense for long, and hurried towards the door to tell Pai-Khambarov.

Pai-Khambarov, however, forgot to be cautious. Dushan caught a note of impatience in his voice:

"What's the matter? What hurts?"

"I'm cold... My throat..." Dushan was angry at Pai-Khambarov for his abruptness.

"So here are the fruits of education!" Pai-Khambarov exclaimed loudly, failing to remember the sleepers all around. "Enough of this old-fashioned nonsense! As for the boy, he'll have to go to the infirmary, of course."

The infirmary was in the same courtyard, beyond the washroom. Dushan had peeked into the window once when Mordekhai was laying there with stomach troubles, but now as they put him in the bed he fretted over its closeness to the room where he had passed the feverish night. It seemed that for him to recover quickly he should be farther from the dormitory, as

if now it were a place of sickness from which he must protect himself, get away.

But he was a little comforted by the feeling of newness about this place, and of himself, ill, in this white room on a wide bed where you could lie peacefully, forgetting about the humdrum of routine days: getting up in the morning at the duty teacher's summons, the silly run around the playing field, the lessons, meals at fixed hours, going to sleep on command. He liked being ill. The days when he was healthy seemed to twist the cord of routine, of obligations, tighter around him. The irritation and tiredness would build up inside him, and the series of days seemed to stretch out endlessly, shoving one another along as if they were in a hurry. But you could shake it all off, run away, get free at least for a little when you were ill. He had often pretended illness even at home. Not wanting to get up in the morning, he would say: "Something's wrong. I don't feel good." And all day he would wear a sorry face, watching everyone else pity him, cater to his every whim.

There were two other boys in the infirmary. Dushan had seen them before: Akram, a fourth-grader, and an older boy, Naim, from the seventh grade. Both of them, probably because they were older, pretended Dushan was a total stranger, come to their school from no one knew where.

"But I've been here a long time," Dushan said, thinking that they were probably putting on an act because they did not want to be friendly to him. He was not offended. He knew that it was always like that when he came to a new place, even if it were the infirmary, only two steps from the dormitory where he was already accepted by almost everybody: once again he would have to overcome the hostility that his looks, his seeming arrogance, aroused on first impression.

His neighbors were appealing in the way they bore their illness: lightly, cheerfully. Nothing kept them in bed for long, not even pains and high temperatures. The older boy, Naim, turned out to be particularly high-spirited: as soon as the nurse went out for a minute he would jump from one bed to another and race around the room. He kept admiring himself in the

mirror, inspecting the down on his upper lip, which was already darkening.

He thought for some reason that it was on the idle days, when a youngster could escape the gaze of others, his mustache sprouted. One fine morning he would wake up changed, grown-up and irresistible, and would stun all the girls.

Even a simple thing like a sore throat was hard for Dushan to bear, but he fell in with the joking mood of his neighbors. As soon as Gul, the practical nurse, came in to rub Naim's back with some strong-smelling ointment, he and Akram would sit on the bed to join the fun.

For the third evening, Naim was repeating in the same melting voice:

"How warm your hands are tonight, nurse. Oh, I'm burning... Oh, the flames."

"You naughty boys!" she cried despairingly. "I won't come to sit with you any more." There was something touching in her embarrassment, in her whole appearance. It was only the year before that she had graduated from the girls' boarding school in Tashlak and come here, to a boys' school, to work as a nurse. And although she tried to seem very aloof and grown-up she could not get over the feeling that she was still in school herself.

Dushan laughed at Naim and Gul, but at the same time he watched carefully the way they acted. It was easy to see they were both tense, unnatural: that was why Naim fussed so and behaved coarsely sometimes, which made Gul blush. But Dushan sensed that the two of them were very similar in some way, and that they liked one another.

Between seven and nine in the evening, after all the shots and rub-downs, the infirmary was left without any supervision. The day nurses had finished work, and the night nurses had not come on duty yet. Outside the windows it was the time after supper, and boys who had finished their schoolwork would come to peek into the infirmary windows. Once Appak and Mordekhai even dashed inside.

"Shan, should I bring you something good to eat?" shouted Appak, shoving aside the cautious Mordekhai, who was trying

to pull him back outside, saying, "We shouldn't be in here. We might catch something."

"No, Pak, there's no need," Dushan was so glad that he wanted to get out of bed. "Thanks anyway. They'll bring me something from home day after tomorrow. I'm feeling better." There must have been something in the friendly conversation between the younger boys that bothered Naim. He stamped his foot in displeasure and pushed Appak out the door.

Before Dushan could express his surprise and indignation, Naim began to explain:

"He has shifty eyes. I've seen him, running along the corridors, looking all around him. You must have noticed that everyone who comes in here has gentle, pure eyes, like a dove's. The doctor and the attendant are beautiful ladies, and they keep their eyelashes wide open like they were afraid of smudging their eyes. But your friend's eyes are evil. They're the kind that can spoil things with just a look." Naim was staring into the mirror, getting ready to sneak out of the school, as he had the night before, to roam the streets of Zarmitan with his friends.

Dushan could not tell whether he was joking or serious. Just to be safe he said:

"I don't believe you. Appak is all right." And with the recklessness that he showed so often he added: "Your Gul never looks at anything straight. It's impossible to catch her eye."

Naim stopped beside Dushan's bed in surprise and then bent over him slowly, grimacing. Dushan, thinking that he was fooling again, stared straight back at him without blinking.

"And you're completely blind!" Naim spat out. He grabbed a pillow from the next bed and forced it down on Dushan's face so hard that he couldn't breathe, did not know how to defend himself.

But then a whistle came from outside the windows, and Naim threw the pillow aside. He ran to the door, where his classmates were waiting, calling him to join their evening stroll around Zarmitan.

Dushan took a deep breath, wiped away his tears, and looked shamefaced at Akram, who had watched the whole scene sitting calmly on his bed.

"He has a nasty temper," said Dushan. He turned away and pulled the blanket over his head, wanting to lie motionless and forget about the bitter injustice he had suffered.

"Why don't you tell the director?" came Akram's voice from far away. "Say that an older boy tried to smother you." In his impatience Akram must have got off the bed and begun hopping up and down beside Dushan. Now his voice was very near: "I would tell him. I wouldn't be afraid." And then for some reason he added: "I liked the horse-breaker at the stud-farm. I want to be brave like that."

Dushan pretended to be asleep. He was still thinking about Naim:

"He's mean. And I admired him because he is tall and handsome. He and Gul are alike—he has a soft face, like a girl's. But he's cruel inside."

Akram must have standing over Dushan the whole while, not knowing how to get at him. Finally he said: "You're a coward, Shan. You don't know how to stand up for yourself." He went back to bed then, still fuming at not having been able to put Dushan up to telling.

"The older boys are so strong and graceful looking on the playing field, chasing after the ball." Dushan realized that suddenly, because of Naim, he had become interested in form, in the things that made a face attractive and moving. Where had that interest come from? Was it from what Akram has said? Dushan had picked up the mirror from Naim's table and was peeking at his face: Had he grown a mustache overnight?

"Did they put you here because of your cheek?" Akram asked.

"No, my throat."

"Your left cheek is swollen, have you noticed that?" Akram pressed on.

"It's always been that way. It's not a swelling, that's just the shape it is." Dushan was not at all disconcerted. Long ago he had worried over his lopsided face, but it no longer troubled him.

"He came out the wrong way," Naim scoffed. "Everyone else popped out neatly, holding their heads straight, but he couldn't

make up his mind which way to turn."

"Probably when you were coming out you knew that people were going to beat you up, huh Shan?" Akram waved his arms and made a grotesque face.

Or perhaps the interest in form, this unnoticed change, had come to Dushan from the pain that began in his feet and then become a fever, moving on to his throat and head. The pain's movement through the smallest vessels, the heat of his blood, had forced him to become aware of his body, of its suppleness and elasticity, its ability to adapt and change internally in times of sickness. And his thought had moved along some strange passage from his own body, helpless and weak, to Naim's, which Gul rubbed so painstakingly with ointment.

"Pai-Khambarov has a handsome face," Dushan thought. "And Mother is beautiful. The men in Zarmitan are not good-looking: their eyes are narrow and their faces are black. But there are a lot of pretty women. Grandmother wasn't beautiful, although we loved her anyway."

Dushan remembered Grandmother saying that animals became like people when they were sick, but a sick person turned back into an animal if he gave in to his illness. Disease could humiliate a person so that he was no longer able to rise above his sufferings.

Dushan sensed that someone had come up to his bed. He thought it was the night nurse. But then the blanket was pulled off, and someone breathed excitedly right into his sweating face: it was Naim.

"Did I get back on time? Did anybody notice I was gone?" Without waiting for an answer he sat down on the edge of Dushan's bed.

"There I was running along, Shan... Well, to make it short, Gul saw me. She was so mad she almost cried. I told her that I was careful to wipe all the ointment off before I went out..."

Dushan could barely understand what he meant. He stared into Naim's face: the other boy talking to him frankly, excitedly, as if Dushan were his own age. Not wanting Naim to think he was sulking, he asked:

"She's from Zarmitan? She lives here?"

"Of course! She chased me back here. She says that after a rub-down I shouldn't even walk around inside, where it's warm. And there I was out on the street."

Dushan climbed out of bed and sat down on his pillow. He sensed that Naim, in his delight, had become foolish, harmless. He seemed to be waiting helplessly for sympathy of some kind. Dushan said:

"No, she's not from Zarmitan. You ask her."

"Why not?" Naim was puzzled. "What difference does it make?"

"Her face is interesting, refined," Dushan said quietly. He wanted to please Naim. "Maybe she came here from Bukhara."

Naim got up, looked at Dushan in astonishment:

"Refined, you say? Do you know what you are, Shan—a Bukharan nationalist!" And he threw himself on top of Dushan, knocking him back onto the bed. Dushan was afraid of this sort of boisterous play; he laughed hollowly and fought back ineffectually, until the noise brought the night nurse from the next room.

Just before they fell asleep, as Dushan lay luxuriating in the warmth and quiet, calmed by having made up with Naim, the older boy suddenly turned to him again and asked:

"Why was the director making you dig that ditch, Dushan?"

Fighting back his yawns, Dushan repeated the story dully, omitting the details. But even so his words excited Naim for some reason.

"You should have thought something up. Said that the ball reminded you of an ostrich egg, and you wanted to break it open and make an omelet for your whole class." Naim spoke as if he was sorry the accident had not happened to him.

Dushan tried to stammer something, and then yawned. He was sure that Naim was teasing again.

"I don't understand. They would have sent me to a different hospital then."

"What is there to not understand? You talk like you were born yesterday. They wouldn't have sent you anywhere. They let fools off."

It seemed that Akram had only now got the drift of their

conversation. He liked what Dushan had said, and repeated it with a smirk:

“Yes, they would have put Dushan in the crazy house.”

“Shh! ” hissed Naim. “Listen, Dushan: Once Nasreddin* brought his wheat to the mill and began taking grain from other sacks and putting it in his own. ‘What are you doing?’ asked the miller. ‘I don’t know, I’m a fool,’ ” Nasreddin answered. ‘If you’re a fool, why aren’t you pouring grain from your sack into other people’s?’ And Nasreddin said: ‘I’m just an ordinary fool. If I did that, I’d be a total fool.’ ”

Naim was silent, as if he were expecting laughter or some other reaction from his audience. But Dushan, whom the story had left indifferent, kept tactfully silent as well. Akram, always slow to understand, asked after a moment:

“And then what? What did the miller do?”

“What did the miller do?” You could tell that the question irritated Naim. “He probably laughed and let Nasreddin off.”

“But maybe he didn’t.” Akram refused to let the matter drop. “Maybe he sent him away to the crazy house.”

“Of course, if he was a jackass like you! ” shouted Naim. Dushan did not want Naim to be embittered by his ungrateful listeners; he felt that there was something in the story that its teller wanted the others to know. He asked:

“But what good did it do for Nasreddin to pretend that way? The miller took the grain back anyway before he let him go.”

“Certainly he did,” Naim agreed readily, as if he were heartened by the perceptiveness of the question. “But the wheat—how can I explain it? The wheat was only an external, for the stomach. But does a fool ask what good a thing does him? Once Nasreddin wanted to become a merchant. He bought eggs at nine for a rouble at one place in the bazaar and then went to another and sold them at ten for a rouble. When they asked him, ‘Hodja, why are you selling at a loss?’ Nasreddin answered: ‘Isn’t it all the same, profit or loss? I want my friends to see that I’m trading, and respect me for it.’ ”

* Nasreddin-Hodja—the hero of a series of humorous traditional tales.—Tr.

Dushan was pleased by the story, and laughed quietly. But before he could make any comment Akram objected:

“I think it’s stupid to trade at a loss.”

“You’re not from Atkend, are you?” Naim asked sneeringly.

“No. What has that got to do with it?”

“People from there never like that story. When they hear it they jump up and start shaking their fists. It seems to them that Nasreddin dishonored trade.”

Dushan listened to the exchange, fearing that Naim would be offended and not tell them any more about Nasreddin.

“But what was it Nasreddin really wanted, Naim?” he asked gently.

“Fools want to find an inner good. They want to tell the truth and not get beaten for it, or at least not too hard. Once Nasreddin was invited to a banquet. He put on old clothes, and no one paid any attention to him. So he slipped away and went home. He changed into fancy clothes, threw a fur robe around his shoulders, and went back. He was received respectfully at the door of the house and seated in the place of honor. Pointing to one of the delicacies on the table, the host said, ‘Try this, please, Hodja! ’ But Nasreddin held his fur robe out to the dish and said, ‘You first, my robe! ’ The guests were amazed: ‘What is the meaning of this, Hodja?’ And he explained: ‘Since you honor my robe, let my robe partake of the feast.’ ”

“I know that one,” said Akram.

Dushan had heard the story too, from the boys on his street, but he did not tell Naim. He was a little disappointed, though, that the story was not interesting—too moralizing. But to keep the conversation going he asked:

“Have you ever tried pretending yourself, Naim? Saying crazy things?”

“Yes. It doesn’t work for me.”

“Why not? Have you ever tried to get out of a punishment that way, by pretending you’re a fool?”

“Oh, I’ve tried all right... But you could pull it off, Shan, I swear you could! Everything about you is strange—that left cheek of yours, and the look in your eyes. Try it sometime, Shan—really! ” Now Naim was striding up and down the room,

his hands moving excitedly, as if something that was important to him depended on Dushan's doing what he asked. "You could trick anyone, even the most experienced psychiatrist."

Naim's words made Dushan uneasy. Why was he so carried away with this idea? Akram seemed to be chewing on something. Finally he snorted:

"Don't do it, Shan. He's putting you up to some crime. What do you want him to do, anyway? Huh, Naim?"

Naim seemed to have calmed down. He sat on his bed.

"Nothing, I'm just telling him ... for the future. In case he does something reprehensible."

Dushan was disappointed, even frightened. He could not understand what Naim was leading up to and felt sorry that their conversation, which had begun so well, had little by little become boring and diffuse.

"I won't do anything. I'll try to live cautiously," said Dushan ironically. Suddenly he felt that he was tired. And his tiredness, the tone of his voice, must have helped put Naim and Akram to sleep: neither of them made any answer, and soon their deep, sonorous breathing told Dushan they had dozed off.

Dushan tossed and turned. He was displeased with himself for having said that he would try not to do anything reprehensible. That had been stupid: he saw only now, after Naim had gone to sleep, how interesting their conversation had been that evening. Hadn't his country grandfather told him the same thing once? "Everything that has not yet become, and longs to, is rich and interesting. And everything that has become, and is content, is poor and commonplace, without even the willingness to sacrifice a drop of blood.

Grandfather had said it was better to sacrifice a drop of blood for the sake of the truth than to be a self-satisfied dullard, thinking that you have everything. So that was true. How many truths were there in life? Probably not many—Naim had repeated the same thing, a few years later and in a completely different place. Tomorrow Dushan would probably guess something that would be said years afterwards by others. One person's thought joined on to another person's, and that one onto someone else's, and so everyone was joined in a circle, by a single

thought. What was that thought about? It seemed that everyone was searching for the answer to that riddle.

On his first visit, Grandfather had walked through the courtyards of the school exclaiming loudly with surprise. He looked into the kitchen, the washroom, into Dushan's classroom, and spoke with the teachers so deferentially that he seemed to be mocking them. Afterwards he looked for a long time at Dushan, as if unable to understand anything in the little life of the boarding school, or indeed anything of what he had seen in all his life.

"What did they send you here for?" he asked Dushan, as if the boy were hiding some transgression which he did not know about. "What is this place you're in!"

Dushan's aunt did not even come through the gates. She sat drearily on a rock, and between her knees the boy whom Dushan had seen lying in a cradle at Grandfather's house stood defiantly erect, not moving. Dushan looked at them all: they had probably come to visit offices in the city again. What were they looking for, the three of them? What protection did they hope for from the lawyer?

It was a difficult meeting: there were long silences, as if they could not find a way to express what was troubling them. And when the words came they were spoken hastily, irritably. Grandfather had said:

"Go get your things and come to live with us! Here you're living like an orphan, when your mother is alive—and your father too!"

"How can we do that? We would have to talk it over... Do you really think they would let us take him?" said Dushan's aunt. It seemed she was uneasy here; something on her mind was bothering her.

"I understand it with my miserable brain, with my bald shiny head and my scraggly beard. Yes, this is the time of collective living! But aren't you and I and this little cricket here," he pointed to the small boy, "aren't we a collective too? I told you, Dushan, that you would have a hard life of it. You didn't believe me then, but now it's come true!" When Grandfather had spoken his mind they went away, and Dushan felt relieved.

Their conversation had been somber, but it was quickly forgotten—probably so that it could all be remembered now. What was that thought about? Or did it exist at all?

But why Grandfather asked that strange question: "What did they send you here for?"

The boys asked each other that when they met, as if they had been banished to the boarding school for various crimes. But certainly Grandfather had not overheard their long talks at night, and Appak's strange confession.

"What did they send you here for, Dushan?"

"I don't really know. My father went away. Maybe because I was dull, and wouldn't eat, and didn't have enough life in me."

"I should have your troubles!" Appak laughed. And he told how his mother had conceived him from another man, to get revenge on her husband, who did not love her. And how her husband had suddenly fallen in love with her again, and loved Appak even more than his own children—until the deceit was found out. Then Appak had been sent to the boarding school.

"Which father loved you? Your real one?" asked Dushan.

"I wouldn't put it like that. The husband of my mother—that's more exact."

Smiling as he remembered those words, Dushan fell asleep. And the next morning he learned from the other boys, who watched their teachers' every step and knew everything about them, that there had been a meeting at which the traditionalists and progressives had done battle. It seemed that Pai-Khambarov had accused AblyaaSANOV of clinging to all that was outmoded in teaching and education, of living in the old days and not wanting to make room for the new. He cited the shattered ball as an example, asking: "Doesn't the disproportionate concern over this object as a part of the Prince's estate bespeak an idealization of bygone days?" In answer AblyaaSANOV had tugged indignantly at the lapel on which he wore his medal. "I wanted to destroy this palace even in those days! I wanted to rub it off the face of the earth with cannon fire!" And in turn he hinted to the assembled teachers that some sort of blameworthy connections existed between Pai-Khambarov, a bachelor, and a mar-

ried woman—connections which would have to be administratively reviewed.

Pai-Khambarov had the support of Aunt Bibisara, who sat pale and mortified the whole while; Kushakov, the physics teacher; Bessarab, the physical education teacher; Kim, who taught botany and singing; and Berlin, the German teacher, whom everybody called Hamburg for some reason. All of these men lived in the school itself, in the gallery. Bolotaliev switched to Ablyasianov's side at the last moment, remembering that the director had promised to give him land for a house of his own in Zarmitan next year. Serdolyuk, the military instructor, sat through the whole meeting with a vexed expression, as if to say: "What sort of a battle is this? There's not even room to deploy properly. It's beneath my dignity to engage." He remained neutral, and so the meeting ended indecisively. It was agreed that "the case of Dushan Temuri" was not yet closed.

Dushan understood, of course, that all this had not seemed so humorous during the meeting itself. The teachers had troubles and cares of their own. But that was the way the other boys told him about it, laughing and making fun, as pupils will make fun of teachers they nonetheless respect. And although there was much in the account that was amusing, Dushan was chagrined that his name had figured in it. And when Mother came to visit him after his illness her behavior distressed him too. They talked of almost nothing except the incident, and Mother demanded that he repeat again everything the director had said to him, and describe the tone of voice he had used.

"There's no good in doing that," Dushan said. "It would be better to forget it as fast as I can." But Mother told him that Pai-Khambarov had insisted she complain to the regional school board. Dushan did not ask her to explain what that meant. He was hurt that his mother was ignoring him, that she could talk only of Pai-Khambarov and went from courtyard to courtyard looking for him. A bad feeling was building up inside him, a resentment against Mother. He was ashamed of himself: he had never felt like this before, even when she had hurt him.

"There are funny things going on," Dushan smirked. "They say Pai-Khambarov has connections with Aunt Bibisara."

"What sort of connections?" Mother had not understood Dushan's words, but she guessed his meaning from his tone.

"You know ... between a man and a woman," Dushan said matter-of-factly. Seeing Mother's embarrassment, he decided to correct the impression his words had made. "But maybe it's not true. Just silly talk."

Mother got up angrily. "I don't know what's got into you here, Dushan," she said loftily. "What business do you have talking about grownups' private lives?"

But when she brought Dushan home for Sunday she was affectionate, and a little sad as if the boarding school had made her very tired. Why was she always so nervous there? Was it the incident with the marble ball?

Amon, as always, was glad to see his brother and wanted him to come play in the street. But Dushan preferred to remain in the courtyard. All through that day he kept feeling that the courtyard was changing, becoming dismal. Its warmth was leaving it, and its spirit; it could no longer calm him. Where had the secrets gone? Where was the black bodyguard with his cane? That was all comical. And the painful thing was not that he had never existed he had but that he had tricked Dushan, betrayed him.

Even in its appearance the courtyard had become cheerless, although Mother tried to keep it clean, having the walls painted, replacing a split banister, having the roof retiled. She talked constantly of Nabi-Zade, without whom she could not have bought the boards and bricks and lime. Nabi-Zade! Now that Father had forsaken her, her cares and conversation had become trivial. Everything had changed. If only Grandmother were alive she would have never allowed Mother to spend her strength and time on making complaints to different offices, to the regional school board.

Grandfather had been right: life was leaving these quiet, solitary courtyards behind, moving on to unknown courtyards where life would be lived collectively. Why? Under what curse? Had people been unhappy in them, lonely? From generation to generation... All of their heritage... Dushan would have to understand everything about the new life before he could answer these questions.

But for now, as he returned to the boarding school, Dushan thought about how his sense of time had changed. Earlier time had been like something continuous, without days and years, as if it were not passing by at all: there was only a feeling of simple, natural living. But now time itself had been altered, was divided into episodes, experiences that had to be lived through from beginning to end, over many days.

II

Now he had made these three courtyards his own as well. The spirit of his ancestral home had fled to this place, but it was scared by the open spaces and the alien atmosphere, by the noise, the tramping of feet, and the jostling crowds. And it had begun to disperse into the dusty, airless sky, leaving the last of his line alone and unprotected.

He remembered the names of those who had been before him: Istam-Hodja, Grandmother's father; Makhmud-Hodja, his father's father; Mir-Temur, his great-great-greatgrandfather's father. Could you say that: the father of his great-great-great-grandfather? The impossibility of expressing that, its obscurity, troubled him: it was the sign of a distant, impalpable kinship, which even words could not formulate. It was not like an inner, spiritual tie. And farther: Mir-Ismail—probably it would be simpler to call him the father of Mir-Temur. In Arabic that had an ornate, elegant sound: Mir-Ismail ibn Mir-Artyk... Dushan knew one other phrase in Arabic. He was secretly proud of it as something that was his own, not adopted from another: "Al kasosil minalkhak." He had read that somewhere. "I too was once as you are." But the reason the phrase pleased him was its interpretation, the secret multiplicity it contained, which only the wise could see. He was a wise boy: unattractive, gangling, the parts of his body absurdly mismatched—like all boys his age. But he was dull, too, with his fondness for morals. "I too was once as you are." You could understand it as something given at the start of life, like fate: "I too was like you are, when I was born." And from this the rest of the interpretation followed: "I

too was once as you are, and you will be as I am" (at the end of your life). And since in this interpretation the end of the phrase was tied with its beginning, its full meaning was: "However our paths in life diverge, we all arrive in one place, because we all began from the same place."

The name Artyk* had been given to his ancestor because of a strange appendage on his hand, like a sixth finger. That strange portent repeated itself every second generation in one of the family's men—it must have spared the lovely hands of the women. ("Ah, ma chérie, ma chérie," Dushan whispered to himself, giggling.) Even on the men's hands the sixth finger was probably the result of some strange alignment of the planets. With each century it grew smaller, until their line lost its inner strength and could produce no more boys. Mir-Sattar had twelve daughters; Said-Akbar, eight; Mir-Kadyr, six. And not a single boy, although the number of girls declined too after Mir-Vali, who had given the family sixteen daughters. After Mir-Kadyr, Mir-Afzal had four daughters. Two of them, twins, had died in the same year of a nervous disorder, although they lived in different cities, both of them happily married women.

But something in the family must have changed after those twins. Somewhere the strength and cunning were found to trick the moon—the planet of the female principle—and once again a boy was born, although without any sixth finger. His delighted parents had named him Khudoydod.** But there was little cause for joy: it was clear from Khudoydod's character that the family had worn itself out, become abased, and could no longer produce strong men like the six-fingered ancestors. Khudoydod was weak-willed, and in ten years he squandered the inheritance which others had laid up for him in fifty years of labor. He became the source of a family proverb: "If you fool the moon, the sun will take revenge."

Dushan knew already that the sun was honored as the male, paternal principle. And he understood how proverbs were born out of enlightenment, wisdom, and irony.

* Artyk—extra (*Uzbek*).

** Khudoydod—gift of benevolence (*Tajik*).

And he was wise too, even if he were dull and easily offended. But there was a strange coldness in all his thoughts. Nothing that had happened in the family disturbed or affected him, although there must have been suffering—the tragedies of the sixth finger and of Khudoydod's folly. But perhaps a chill concentration was needed to understand deeply, penetratingly; surprise, warmth, compassion—everything that was personal and subjective—could distort and deceive.

But could it be that his family would die out without leaving a trace? Or perhaps its abasement and depletion was only external—to foil the envious, the family was pretending to have burned itself down to the last ash. And was this being done out of love for one, who would tell the world afterwards about all the family's sufferings, all its unknown journeyings? And would that one be a great man, whose family was so exhausted that he found himself surrounded by moving, breathing specters and no more? Like an overgrown tree, he had drawn all the juice out of his kindred, had brought failure and darkness on them all without even knowing what he was doing.

Who was that one? Was his name still remembered? Did Dushan want everyone to know and love him, to come and thank him for something when they heard his name? Thank him for what? How was he to make himself known?

But now he was concerned by something simpler: Who would he give to the family as his successor—a boy or a girl? Once when Gul was flirting with Naim she had said it was lucky her mother had born a girl child. Dushan did not know why she said that—he had missed what was said before. She dropped something on the floor, and with a little cry squatted down to pick it up, her bare knees showing. There was a brown birthmark on her right leg.

"And the turtle-dove on the roof, the one with the hurt wing, is probably the incarnation of great-great-grandfather Artyk," Dushan thought wryly. Yes, he had believed once in that sort of direct reincarnation, had been absorbed in the thought of it and delighted in the awful, mysterious workings of life, the comprehension of which seemed to promise him joy.

Now time had freed him of that belief, had forced him to renounce, with a bitter smile, many parts of himself by showing him they were naive and silly. He was becoming a sceptic. He saw falseness not in the outside world, like so many boys his age, not in others, but in himself. And he laughed at his secret love for the mantis-woman.

He knew now that things he read and learned might be untrue, like the story of Zuleika. As it turned out, she was not only regarded as an unfaithful wife, who had borne false witness because of her unsatisfied lust but also as a saint: people admired her for her love of beauty. Zuleika's holiness was especially surprising to him because once he had liked to think of himself as Joseph the Fair. What had he liked more in the story of Zuleika: the punishment of her unfaithfulness and wickedness, or her devotion to beauty? Here was a change—when Dushan was protected by his home, and thought of the story of Zuleika as a legend, he had rejoiced in the punishment of evil, but now he was more excited by the other Zuleika. He needed the virtue in her now, that kind of sainthood; it was as if he hoped she would protect him.

Could it be that one time of life was for learning, and another for turning away from what had been learned, recognizing it as an illusion? When a person lost what he had, and came to understand something different how could he help but feel petulant about truth's fickleness? That was what Dushan felt when he found out the truth about his mother's marriage.

It turned out not to have been all that romantic: how the family had been in decline and how father's people—builders from the country—had joined their vigor to the line of aristocratic judges thanks to the efforts of Dushan's grandfather, who had died content to see his sickly daughter married to a poor student.

It was all much more simple and ordinary. When Uzbek became the official language of administration and business, energetic young men from backwaters like Zarmitan had flooded into the city, eager to carve out a place for themselves. They gained confidence in carrying out their stern, practical work, and felt the desire for a change, for something delicate and

fanciful: a pretty Bukharan girl from an old family with nothing left now but its cherished language, Tajik.

Fearing that their fading, unworldly daughters would become old maids, the parents, cursing their fate, gave their hands to "fortune's favorites" -times had changed. And then the energetic young men hurried on, seeking new horizons, like Dushan's father.

And what about the women whose beauty seemed so out of place here? When Dushan had wondered about them, Naim teased him, called him a Bukharan nationalist. Had they come here from Bukhara? He would have to find out more about that when he was out roaming in Zarmitan.

Dushan was standing in the big third courtyard. Mollayev, the mathematics teacher, had sent him out of the class. He watched the tenth-graders running back and forth with rifles. At a command from Serdolyuk, the military instructor, they threw themselves and crawled forward clumsily, laboriously. They wore serious faces, intent on their exercise, but they floundered in the dusty hollows of the playing field with their long rifles. Naim looked like a toad hopping across the sand with a twig between its front paws. It was funny to watch him pressing the toes of his boots into the ground, squeezing the smooth stock of his rifle to his chest and sliding forward along it.

"Forward! To the target!" came Serdolyuk's voice. He bounced up and down beside the wall on his springy legs. From time to time he looked through his binoculars to see whether someone's bayonet was pointed in the right direction.

Dushan felt that Moilayev disliked him. Perhaps he had hated Dushan since the boy first appeared in his class. Dushan was not good at mathematics. He had long distrusted its meaningless exactness: "If one train went from point A to point B in seven hours at a speed of sixty kilometers per hour, and a second train went to point C..." He felt trapped, stultified, by the very first word, "if": "If one runner started at point A..." "If a poultry farm produces one million eggs each year..." The exactness seemed deceitful to him, because the "if", which carried in it a supposition, was not binding or true to life. And today, when

Mollayev stood beside the blackboard and began, "If..." Dushan had said quietly without thinking, "But what if not?" Perhaps he had wanted to break down the seriousness that threatened him with failure, inability to solve the problem.

A laugh passed through the class. It was not from the lame joke, of course, but from relief--here was a chance to relax. When Mollayev asked who had interrupted him, Dushan stood up and came out from behind his desk, looking defiantly at the teacher.

Mollayev's eyes sparkled with anger, but he contained it, only shook his head wearily and reproachfully:

"Dushan Temuri: the slowest boy in the class. Instead of trying to catch up with the better pupils, Mordekhai and Arshak..." He went to the door and flung it open, then jutted his chin theatrically towards the courtyard. "Go. Even if you have no respect for me personally... You have insulted the great men who invented and developed the science of mathematics. Think about that. And when you understand it, I shall admit you to our mathematics class again."

And Dushan went out, although just as he passed through the door he felt awkward, even ashamed. It was not, of course, because of the great mathematicians of the past, who were just as abstract for him as that "if", but because he needed to get out of his predicament somehow. And now he moped outside the classroom windows, not knowing what to do. He could have got off simply and easily by asking Mollayev's pardon: "Excuse me, Azerbaijan Isayevich." "Excuse you for what?" "For misbehaving." - "No, you were guilty of more than that." And so it would continue, on and on. The apology would have been humiliating for Dushan and not done him any good; sooner or later his pride and unwillingness to lie would have betrayed him. "You haven't learned your lesson yet, Dushan Temuri. Think about it a little more before you go to sleep tonight." And as always it had begun with some trifle, with a careless word that seemed to pop out as if the one who said it was not Dushan but his crafty, mischievous double, who had suddenly possessed him. And now Dushan would have to bear the punishment.

He was not good at grammar, either. The prefixes and suf-

fixes, the cold dullness of learning by rote. But history and literature were different: in those classes he felt confident, capable. His assurance did not make him insolent, like the other boys who excelled at history. He was not defiant but shy and docile; he wanted Anvarova to be pleased with him. He thought of Mollayev raging in the teachers' lounge: "What a blockhead that Temuri is! I had to chase him out of my class again today." And Anvarova would say, mainly for Ablyaasanov's benefit: "But he works so hard for me. He's so interested in history that he read the whole textbook and remembers all of it. I had a terrible migraine yesterday, and of course the boys saw that I was suffering. I started the lesson: 'Now I will tell you about the campaigns of our countryman, Temurlyang, who is known in Europe as Tamerlane...' Suddenly Dushan raised his hand: 'You're not feeling well, Khadicha Nazarovna. Would you let me tell the class about the campaigns?' Would you believe it? He was nervous, and I had to correct him a few times, but all in all he had it right, except for that legend about 'Emir Timur, the son of Iskander the Two-Horned, scourge of pagans and evildoers,' and some other wild thing he put in."

"He was purposely making nonsense out of a serious subject," insisted Mollayev. "He's always coming up with sceptical remarks about whatever is exact and well verified."

"It's just his age. It will pass," Pai-Khambarov put in. As the chief teacher of Dushan's class he felt that Mollayev's words were a reflection on him. Ablyaasanov, seeing that his guidance was necessary in this dispute among his teachers, added with pretended indifference, which was really caution:

"Of course such quirks of character must be corrected. But I see nothing particularly wrong, Khadicha Nazarovna—provided of course it is not done all the time, made into a principle or law that must always be obeyed... I see nothing wrong in backing up historical facts with popular legends. Of course there must be no mystification, no religious hocus-pocus..." Since the notable meeting at which the progressives had nearly got the upper hand, the director had surrounded himself with a fog of reservations and qualifications, but nevertheless he felt obliged to argue: Anvarova was known as a progressive, a proponent of

pure scientific knowledge, without any admixture of superstition or conjecture.

Anvarova was a heavy, slow-moving woman who often sat huddled over her desk. One of the boys had found out she had a disease called brucellosis, and that it came from livestock. After that Dushan began to take an interest in biology. "She probably ate some pork by mistake," he thought.

The tenth-graders were running across the field again now. Ever so often, at Serdolyuk's command, they would stop suddenly and thrust their bodies forward sharply as if they were bayoneting an enemy. At the moment of the thrust the toes of their boots lifted the sand, but before it could spurt up they trod it under their soles. You could hear the crack of their feet coming down--the sound was like the popping of the home-made sand bombs with which one class often attacked another at the school.

As he thrust with his bayonet, Naim winked at Dushan, and Dushan nodded back at him encouragingly. He was glad that after having been shamefully banished from the class he had seen Naim. They had run into each other often since the time they were in the infirmary together.

Dushan could not be Appak's friend, though, despite all his efforts. Something put him off--probably the other boy was too lively. Appak had been drawn to Dushan, and had shown a touching protectiveness. Now he was spiteful: he probably thought Dushan was cold and haughty. In fact, Dushan had not made friends with any of the boys in his class. He felt more interested in the older fellows, like Naim.

Appak got a piece of pork fat from somewhere, rubbed it on Yamin's face and lips while he was sleeping, and left it on his pillow. By morning the fat had melted into a big yellow spot. When Dushan woke up he noticed that it smelled as if a dog had been in the dormitory--it was strange that pork should smell like a dog.

Yamin had spent the whole time until breakfast vomiting. Appak sat on the edge of a toilet bowl, watching him with malicious glee. Yamin's hair shone as if it had been brilliantined.

"Dismissed!" Serdolyuk shouted. But the tenth-graders

were in no hurry to stack up their rifles. They raced around the field, drawing beads on one another and shouting nonsensical orders, like "Paralysis step, forward!" It seemed now they were free from the supervision of the military instructor the warlike spirit was building in them.

Naim came over to where Dushan was standing, and Dushan touched his rifle, laughing. The butt of it was smooth. Dushan wanted to try aiming the gun, but Naim pushed him off playfully and pointed the bayonet towards his belly. Then Dushan saw the date on the black, rusty barrel: 1895.

"Look! That rifle is eighty years old!" Dushan could not find better words to express his sense of time, through which wars passed, and the death of his great-grandfather, and other people's deaths, and life with its countless petty cares. It was as if all those things had piled up in him, in his memory and his soul, and now he was filled with grief, with the gloom and coldness of solitude. It was as if time, having reached as far as Dushan, would fade away without warming him. Trying to hide his agitation, he said something to Naim that had nothing to do with what he was thinking: "I thought your rifles were new. You all try so hard... They're like stage props."

Why was it often impossible to express what came from deep inside—the intuitions and inklings, the shock of sudden realization? You say the wrong thing, get confused, break down. But when you lie it all comes out smooth and convincing.

Perhaps it was necessary to mull over the truth so as to understand its real meaning before you could express it, while lies to fit every situation were always floating on the surface of the mind, ready to use, so that the least bit of thinking located a suitable falsehood. "I don't know. It's hard to say... I don't understand," Dushan thought uneasily. He did not realize yet that it was a blessing not to understand. There had to be something, after all, which was incomprehensible and insoluble. The mind had to rest in nonsense, out of which a new idea would be born often an idea that disillusioned and hurt him, like his discovery of the truth about Mother and Father.

"That fable about the princess and the poor youth who brought new life to a declining family," Dushan jeered to him-

self once more. He sensed somehow that only through irony could he hold on to his affection for Father, whom he had not seen in four years, and for Mother, whose visits were more and more infrequent.

"But why should pork have the smell of a dog?" flashed through Dushan's mind. He felt that he was losing the taste for original thinking, for paradoxical insights. His brain was sated with trivial, bookish knowledge, but all the same his own mind tried to express itself: "Could it be because we Bukharans despise pigs and dogs alike?"

He had read somewhere that long ago broken-down old men were turned out to be eaten by dogs. There was even a kind of dog kept specially for that purpose. The dog was the missing thread, it tied the two ends of life firmly together: those who were leaving the family and those who were coming into it.

And donkeys had to be mercilessly beaten and crippled. The riders would put nails in the ends of their sticks, bloodying the animal's neck with the points at every step. In ancient times donkeys had been symbols of a malign deity. That was how Dushan explained to himself about the strange smell in the dormitory after Appak's trick with the pork bookishly and dully, without any gleam of personal experience, as if he were feeble-minded and did not live on his own account but only swallowed whole what was set before him. Only a distant memory flickered: Grandmother and the old man who chewed the tendrils of the grapevine. He had joked about his courting: "Bo piri khartozi?"* by which he meant: "But of course at my age I am hardly fit to be a bridegroom, I have no sap or vigor in me."

Irod was probably right about the lecherous old men of Bukhara, who liked to marry young girls. "And then, ho-ho!" He puffed out his chest, satirizing the way they pursued the girls, courted them. Dushan, always quick to uphold the honor of Bukhara, held back his laughter. Suddenly he realized what must be at the root of Irod's bitter laughter.

"You yourself are the offspring of an old man with a young

* All I'm good for now is the donkey races (*Tajik*).

wife, admit it, Irod! ” Dushan grabbed the other boy from behind and toppled him onto the bed.

“It’s the truth! He was the last gasp! ” shouted boys on every side, piling up on top of Dushan and Irod to make the ironist confess.

“Yes, it’s true! ” Irod shouted over the din. “But the old man turned out to be so feisty that he soon did my poor mother in.”

“Don’t shout like that! ” Mordekhai was astonished that Irod was not ashamed, had not faltered his confession in a small voice. He decided to show that he too knew a thing or two about life: “Usually it’s the other way around. There was an old man in our neighborhood who married a young girl, and it wasn’t long before he had an apoplexy.”

“Irod’s old man had tabes,” Arshak said. “I knew an Armenian jeweler who had that—it hardens the spine. He buried a lot of young wives.”

“What do you mean, a lot? How many?” Dushan hopped over to Arshak and stepped on his foot so as to topple him onto the bed.

“You’re always butting in with stupid questions, Shan.” Wincing from the pain, Arshak retreated into a corner. “How am I supposed to know? Two, maybe. Is that enough for you?”

“I thought seven or eight. Two is nothing, and especially if they weren’t Armenian,” teased Dushan, becoming more and more excited. He felt piqued and mischievous at the same time, as he often did when the boys were talking about something he understood only dimly. He would interrupt the conversation, turn it into an argument with his remarks.

“As a matter of fact they were local girls, from Bukhara. And the jeweler is living in Bukhara to this day, across from the brick building with the iron fence, the one where the English trade mission used to be. You can check if you want too,” Arshak answered with dignity. He left the dormitory holding his torso rigid as only boys who have acquaintances with tabes can.

“I still can’t understand what that silly donkey thinks there is to be proud about in being friends with people with such

diseases," Dushan threw after him. But nobody backed Dushan up: they were all rooting for Arshak.

Dushan was stung by the haughty note on which Arshak had ended their argument, and the way the boys kept silent, did not respond to his parting shot, which had seemed to him so well-aimed and clever. Only when he had calmed down again did he feel disgust at the silly, banal world his mind occupied, an infantile world furnished with things he knew by hearsay and his nervousness. That was why he was spiteful, bad-tempered, lacking in a sense of inner worth and assurance. Didn't he always try to humiliate his opponent in an argument, so that afterwards they could talk as equals? Only someone who was weak, timidous, and vulnerable could feel a need for that. So the whole battle was inside, with yourself: what was inside was a hundred times worse than the outside, although there was plenty of foolishness there, too—like that pun with the German teacher's name: Berlin-Hamburg.

Often now when Dushan was disappointed in his classmates, or spurned the knowledge in books simply because he could not master it easily, he would wonder where the truth lay. Where could he find the strength to be confident, magnanimous? Perhaps in the green stone in the vacant plot on the other side of the stream, which the people of Zarmitan worshiped. Those with weak vision would sit by the stone and stare at it for a long time without blinking, believing that the green it radiated would cure trachoma or glaucoma. And blind people, elbowing one another aside in their anxiousness, would feel the stone: it was smooth and lustrous from the touch of thousands of hands. Then the supplicants would pass their palms across their eyes, as if they had wound the light that came from the stone around their fingers. The idol had a rather pretentious name: "The Light of the Eastern Quarter."

Why the eastern? Maybe because green and blue were the most venerated colors in the east. Or was there another meaning in the name? The mind of an eastern man, perhaps, was not constructed for calmly stringing out one thought after another, from the trivial to the most profound. It could only reach out in a flash of intuition which suddenly revealed the higher meaning

of things. But that flash could not be held in the mind, and the eastern man, so as not to lose the fleeting thought, transferred it to a stone, a tree, or a body of water. And in time of need he bent over his talisman to draw the magic out again, an incantation against illness or the vicissitudes of fate. The European mind, on the contrary, was patient and methodical. It did not lose the sense of what was learned: it could accumulate knowledge little by little, becoming ingenious, scientific, because it was aimed not to the inside, not into fire or rock, but to the outside, wishing to create flame itself.

Dushan thought of H_2O as an outward sign, the symbol of water (European learning), through which it was joined in nature with air and repelled by fire, becoming steam in a boiler, powering a ship. But he still felt water as something which tied together and healed, going three times around the earth to conceal and wash away what was shameful and then rising high into the air to shine in clouds. The east, superstitious and mystical, struggled within him against the west, the practical. He laughed at the school's two "scientific boys"—Abdulla and Sher—calling them Estradiol and Testosterone,* seeing that they were dazzled by ingenuity, by cold, precise knowledge. But deep inside he was afraid of them; he must have sensed that the future was theirs. Estradiol and Testosterone did well in all their studies and were always winning awards at mathematics competitions. The teachers cited them as examples of intelligence and modern thinking: they had quickly succeeded in freeing themselves of the haze of superstition and mystification.

Pai-Khambarov seemed like a model of modernity - a graduate of Moscow University, an admirer of Goethe. Often on his duty nights he could be heard murmuring playful, youthfully fervent verses:

*The heart respires, unrequited,
Breathing ever-youthful flame,
Smouldering, smoking like an Etna
Deep inside its shell of snow.*

* Estradiol and Testosterone – male and female hormones.

*Then like a ray of dawn you touch
The craggy fastness of the wall,
And once again devoted Hatem
Feels the warning breath of spring.*

But even he, it seemed, was sometimes bewildered and tired by the onrush of life, which manifested itself in fire, energy, and steam. Even he sometimes wanted to relax, to withdraw into himself—probably so that afterwards he could oppose Ably-aasanov's outdated ideas with new strength. Dushan had been grateful to Pai-Khambarov that morning in the dormitory when Estradiol had ridiculed him for his slowness: the “scientific boy” himself had climbed with surprising speed into his brown trousers and the jacket with black tin buttons—the school had instituted a uniform for all its pupils in that year.

Dushan, struggling against his morning depression, was stroking the collar of his jacket and staring glumly at its buttons. Estradiol had called him “turtle”.

“But I’m fast, like a horse!” Estradiol ran to Pai-Khambarov and cavorted around him, expecting praise.

Pai-Khambarov looked at the sullen, impassive face with which Dushan met the day and its cares. Something about it was familiar to him, touching. His answer was rather lofty:

“Yes, a horse... Of course it’s fine to gallop like the wind, free and proud. How beautiful a running horse is, how inspiring! He races along, and time itself holds still, awed by his speed. Yes... But have you ever thought, Sher, about the patience—about the courage and dignity of the turtle? The moment is not enough for the turtle, he is not satisfied, like the horse, with a brief gallop. The turtle needs slowness to feel every instant of time, and on into infinity. And you know, I have always felt a secret envy for the horse, but all the same my heart is with the turtle.”

A man who lived on the land, on a little plot of garden and orchard in Zarmitan, would not have indulged in such a flight of fancy. Pai-Khambarov was still living in the school, up in the gallery at the top of the wooden stairs which were off-limits to the boys. But a certain feeling, or the way the people around

him looked, told him that his hour was near. That was why Pai-Khambarov was so forgiving of Dushan's failings. On her last visit Mother had scarcely got out of the car (she was wearing a European coat of synthetic fur which looked incongruous on her, and her affected gestures were those of a woman who was nearly husbandless) before she told Dushan the news: Ablyasnov was soon to be replaced. So she had won justice after all, this frail, lonely woman torn between her ancestral courtyard and her fashionable tailor—justice dispensed by the regional educational commission. Soon Pai-Khambarov would occupy the director's chair—their benefactor, ally, and so on. Dushan recalled how Grandmother had never been able to understand the good of all the offices that performed useful services: supplying heat and water, removing snow, bringing in coal. Without them their house would have tumbled down one fine day, buried under the snow, washed away in a downpour, or burned up with the heat. But Grandmother would grumble: "May your water canal be filled with coal! And may your warehouses be flooded with water from the bakery!"

"If you can separate the water from the canal, why can't you do the same with the house and its wares?" Mother had laughed. She did not suspect then that she herself would have to hack her way through thickets of red tape to what she called justice. It grieved him to think of that. The endless humdrum could crush a person. A woman born and raised in Bukhara, sheltered from workaday concerns, she had been forced to appear in the offices of the regional commission, put on ill-fitting clothes for her meeting with Chairman Nabi-Zade. Dushan was pierced by pain and sorrow at the thought of that man, whom he had seen only once, for a moment. Ablyasnov and Ayyazov (Dushan caught sight of them once through the fence as they stood in the garden) were aware, of course, that something was going on behind their backs. Their power was slipping away. Nonetheless neither of them betrayed distress in anything: seeing Ablyasnov working busily in his fertile, well-kept garden, Dushan reflected that if Pai-Khambarov were in his place, being forced out of the directorship, he would have been unable to bear it. Ablyasnov, though, was at peace, comforted by his

sense of family, the security in his roots. When they chased him out of the director's office he would come back without a qualm to the summer house he had built: "I made a good job of it, did the school good and helped myself out too. Pai-Khambarov won't be able to take it, though. He hasn't got the guts for it."

Yamin, who had been absorbed in picking up the pears that had fallen outside the fence, stopped to see what Dushan was looking at with such interest.

"What's wrong with you?" He poked Dushan in the ribs. "Why are you gawking like that? Do you want him to see we're not in the metal shop?"

"Do you... Who do you think would make a good director?" Dushan asked in the flat voice he used so as not to "give himself away" at delicate moments.

"It's already been decided—Pai-Khambarov. At least he's not droopy..."

"What do you mean?"

"He's got some spirit to him—not all moody, like you. He's straight..."

"And I'm crooked?" Dushan was out of sorts. With a sour face he sat down on a pile of dry leaves and started spitting out tough pieces of pear-skin.

Yamin wanted to make some bantering reply, but it was hard to find the right words: he was bothered by Dushan's look, the way he stared back fixedly. When Dushan wanted to express his disdain for somebody, his eyes became distant, without dislike or superiority, as if he saw right through whoever he was looking at and pitied him.

"Well all right," Dushan said at last to cut the tension. He began to tap the bottom of the pear with the back of his hand. "Do you want to take a look at yourself?" He pointed to a rotten spot in the pear, out of which was crawling an amazingly white worm, without a single speckle or green hair on its body. It looked as if it were bursting with milk.

"The hell with you," said Yamin with a chuckle. "I don't care if you call me a hedgehog."

"No, a hedgehog would be able to understand that nobody

could be a better director than Ablyaasanov," whispered Dushan. He was still watching the old man working on his little plot of ground. When he was gone something would change in the settled life of the school, which Dushan had more or less grown accustomed to and accepted: dreary, a little chaotic, and rough, but at the same time tense because of the teachers' vying for the directorship. There would be something new, and Dushan would have to labor to understand it and live accordingly. He would make mistakes, for which he would have to answer to himself, if not to his teachers. Dushan liked to decide things freely, on his own. He told the truth, would not flatter anyone, even if he suffered for it. But for all his independence from those around him, he cherished a respect for what was established, for order. He was wary of the new: it took a long, painful time for him to learn to trust people and gain their confidence in turn.

While Dushan was still sitting on the pile of leaves in his fit of melancholy, Yamin pulled the milky worm out of the pear with a twig and put it under his tongue, obviously expecting that Dushan would be shocked. He began to chew, and after swallowing he said:

"The worm was gathering juice from the whole tree to make honey. We used to eat worms like that all the time in Gajivan." Suddenly he got angry at Dushan and prodded him in the side with his foot, as if after consuming the worm Dushan had compared him to he felt justified, special.

"Who cares about your sulks? Maybe your mother can put up with them, or your friends—but you don't have any." The silence of Zarmitan, the smell of the leaves they were sitting on, the unquiet autumn sun that warmed Yamin's close-cropped head—all of these things clearly put him in an aggressive mood. "All you do is make fun of everyone. When they took us to the theater, you didn't like the actors. Do you think you're smarter than anybody else? You call the director's garden a 'plantation', although it's just an ordinary, stinking little garden without a damn thing growing in it. And the robe of honor that they gave to that writer, Timurov, when he came here is a 'frock-robe' according to you."

"The Nobel frock-robe," Dushan corrected evenly, hoping to deflate Yamin's anger.

"Have it your way, that's right. And we're all stupid, and the things we think up are trite and silly. Hamburg-Berlin—you don't like that, it's not funny enough."

"Well it isn't! All you can think about is dogs' tails, and whether a camel can spit poison. That's the sort of thing that interests you! You want to line up a bunch of donkeys and..." Dushan spat. He said all those things jokingly, with a sly smile. None of this was what had made him peevish, though. Once again that strange, vague feeling of numbness was creeping over him, leading him away, cutting him off.

They were so caught up in their conversation that they did not hear the ringing of the bronze bell in the third courtyard. It had been hung so that its voice could reach to the most distant corners of Zarmitan, calling the boys to the dining room for supper or to the reading room to discuss current events.

It was Ablyaasanov himself who had ordered the too-faint electric buzzer replaced with Prince Arif's own bell, from the old days, and so it was only natural that he should be affronted by the two boys arguing outside his garden fence, heedless of the summons. And so playfully, without any unkind intent, he stole up close to them, hid behind a tree, and shouted:

"Are you waiting for personal invitations?"

Dushan and Yamin jumped up prepared for a reprimand. But as they sped down the hill towards the vacant lot Dushan managed to catch a note of leniency in the director's voice. He would not have felt honor was satisfied unless he answered in Ablyaasanov's own tone:

"My apologies! The bronze must be a little damp from the cold weather, it bongs instead of ringing properly." He took a flying jump at the wall, wanting to jump up onto it first, but he slipped back and his foot landed in a puddle, splashing Yamin.

It turned out that the bell was a call to the shower-room. Usually Dushan was too lazy for a shower, but now he decided to go with Yamin, out of friendliness. It had been unkind of

him to get angry—after all, Yamin had agreed to wander around the town with him.

“Let’s just forget it, all right? I’ll give your back a good scrubbing,” Dushan said as they ran into the dormitory to get their towels. As they were going into the shower room a stray thought crossed Dushan’s mind, the sort that should not be lingered over: Why did Yamin always wash in those knee-length black shorts? All the other boys were naked, their bodies red from the steam, showing off their muscles. Yamin hung back in a dark corner like an outcast among them.

It took Dushan a long time to get used to the thick steam. He breathed carefully, trying not to choke on it. He liked to outdo his classmates, surprise them with some original stunt, and so he favored the stall at the end of the row, where a cracked pipe sent down a stream of cold water.

He entered the stall, sat down, crossed his legs, and relaxed. As he himself would have put it, he wanted to gain an understanding of himself through introspection. The loudly splashing water, the tubs being carried back and forth, the sound of running feet—these did not disturb him. He wanted to get down into the workings of his thoughts, the tiniest shifts in his mood, to divide his “I” into parts so that afterwards, when he put them back together, he would be able to gain control over himself. The cold water coursing down on the back of his head, where the “hypothalamus” was according to the modern, scientific conception of things, always seemed to help him concentrate, keep his thoughts from wandering uselessly.

He was still thinking about the reason for the mean, spiteful way he had treated Yamin on their walk. Yamin was not such a bad fellow, after all, if you ignored his main fault: when he did not want to listen to you he would pretend to be hard of hearing.

“Those two just don’t understand one another,” thought Dushan. “And they probably never will.” He abandoned his self-analysis for a moment to listen to Appak and Damirali shouting. Appak had tossed a piece of soap under Damirali’s feet as he was carrying his tub to the faucet. He fell and slid on his bare back all the way to the shower-room door. The floor was as

slippery as if egg-whites had been poured over it—Dushan always walked on tiptoes across it.

Appak and Damirali had tried to settle it peacefully, but little by little they got mixed up, and the names of the places they were born in—Varzob and Narzob—came into the dispute for some reason. Dushan thought what a strange thing the mind was. However enraging and offensive the words of an opponent might be, the mind did not receive them directly, so as to understand and reply to them properly, but only through tangles of other words, said earlier or still unspoken. Before grasping the true meaning of what was heard, the mind selected something against which it could be verified, something from previous experience. And that experience might include a dislike for the one who had spoken, which was why the answer came back distorted, as if in response to something that had not been understood, or not expressed. To understand another, the mind must be pure of such overlays. And getting rid of them was an aid to the introspection in which Dushan sat absorbed.

He concentrated his thoughts again, recalling everything that had happened in the past few days—the arguments, some insult. At first his mind picked out the simplest things, as if it were moving along the surface, but it went deeper on its second time through—down to a firmer level, where things were seldom forgotten or cast aside lightly. He remembered how Mother had stayed only a few minutes on her last visit, and Amon's impatient expression (his face had changed so—his nose had become fleshy and unpleasant to look at). Amon was sixteen already—old enough, surely, not to chatter and brag like a little boy about such foolishness—a motor-scooter. Dushan remembered something sweet, too: some woman in a dream, who seemed to be speaking to him about love. He did not know who she was or why she was there. But there was sorrow after she had gone. He could feel it even now, in his mouth—as if his tongue were a little swollen. And he sensed that she would help him overcome his bitterness. But the bitterness had remained, had descended into the deepest part of him, and now it would never disappear, rising again and again in his memory: together with the strange dream it had forced him to search out the real reason for his

moodiness, for his silly tirade against Yamin during their walk in town.

Certainly, that was it: Appak, Irod, Damirali, Arshak—almost all the boys in his class—had joined together in trying to get Dushan to do something low, something mean, so he would not stand out so with his “outdated morals,” as Irod put it. Each of them had put a younger boy on the “bicycle”. Dushan had promised, had prepared himself for the deed, but when the night came he pretended to be ill. The others began to avoid him, calling him conceited and devious. All of them were becoming more hostile and distant—except for Estradiol, who had condescended to tell Dushan in a friendly way that if he let things go too far the others would beat him in a darkened corridor, closing it off at both ends, or put wisps of straw between his toes that would make him lame for a long time. For the last few nights Dushan had slept badly, worrying about the “bicycle”. And perhaps his nervousness was now keeping him from really concentrating as he sat in his stall.

He raised his eyes and saw Yamin coming through the clouds of gray steam with his tub of water, looking for a bench to put it down on. Dushan called to him, pointing to the empty place beside him.

“Are you going to scrub my back for me?” Yamin looked warily over his shoulder, afraid that someone would hear him talking to Dushan when by a tacit agreement everyone was supposed to ignore him.

“Didn’t I promise to?” But Yamin had already settled between Arshak and Testosterone, and now he asked in a surprised voice:

“Where’s Estradiol? How can you have one hormone without the other?” In reply he was given a sharp blow to the neck—“karate style”, as Testosterone called it.

Yamin’s vision dimmed. He stared into the water for a long time and then, to show his disdain for the cult of violence, he raised his hands as if praying and intoned:

“O Lord, who made the pure water, glory to thee!” He lowered his hands, and before putting them into the water said: “Receive me into the ranks of those who have repented and

been purified. Be my witness on the day of meeting with thee, and teach my tongue thy wisdom." He rinsed out his mouth and spat a stream of water at Testosterone, who moved away in disgust when he saw Yamin industriously cleaning his nostrils with his index finger. "Do not forbid to me the winds of heaven. Receive me into the ranks of those who know the fragrance of the heavenly wind, its spirit and beauty." Then he washed his face, continuing his teasing, to the obvious delight of Arshak, who listened hungrily to every word of the ceremonial ablution. "O Lord, make my face white..."

"Pak, he's making fun of you now!" called Testosterone, and mimicked Yamin's voice: "O Lord, make my face like that of a jackass, and my head bald."

Yamin ignored him, soaping his right arm up to the shoulder:

"O Lord, place my book on my right hand and eternal paradise on my left." He rinsed his left arm, and continued in the same monotonous tone: "Do not proffer my book to me from the northwards, or behind my back, and do not bind it to my neck."

He put his tub on the floor and stood in it: "O Lord, aid my feet when the way becomes slippery, and direct my steps..." Yamin stopped suddenly, as if he had bitten his tongue: he had received another karate chop. Dushan did not see how Yamin was surrounded by Appak, Estradiol (who had suddenly appeared in the shower room), and Testosterone; did not see how they attacked him, trying to twist his arms. It was only when he heard Appak shouting, "You have no right to wash in these!" that Dushan understood they were trying to strip off his shorts.

Yamin, lying at the boys' feet, tried to fight them off and twist away. They poured water on him and laughed. But Appak would not relent. He kept tugging at the shorts, shouting:

"He's marked! That's why he washes in his underwear. He has a spot on his backside, the Devil's brand!" He slid along the floor clutching at Yamin as the other boys roared with laughter, until finally he tore the shorts.

Yamin lay with his belly pressed to the floor, trembling spasmodically. The boys stood over him silently, waiting for

him to confess: he was nearly naked. "The pigs," thought Dushan. He knew that all of this cruelty was the result of Yamin's having gone for a walk with him in Zarmitan, and that the boys who stood above the naked Yamin, themselves naked and savage, were waiting to throw themselves at him.

"Come on, admit it!" Appak kicked at Yamin, and as the others laughed added, "If you don't, we'll sit you in the stall next to your friend Shan and have a look at the difference!"

Yamin broke into sobs, beating the floor with his fists and kicking at someone's tub:

"Yes, I have a big birthmark back there. Why should I have to show it to you?"

"So there!" Appak threw out his hands theatrically. "The truth at last. I wondered why he always kept his shorts on. Now we know." The boys jumped up and down beating on their tubs, as if they were celebrating a victory. With an imperious gesture Appak silenced them: "So, shall we have a look? Or do we take Yam's word?"

Almost none of the boys could stomach that:

"Why bother? Let's take his word for it."

Yamin was sitting up now with a towel wrapped around him, glaring at Appak. His tormentor must have felt that he still was not completely broken:

"You know, Yam, don't you, that no self-respecting Uzbek will let you marry his daughter?"

"That's all right. I'll find one who's not self-respecting, who understands that it's not my fault."

"But it's still not too late," laughed Irod. "If nobody removes the mark until you're fifteen, you can do it yourself. And everything will be all right."

Everyone had been still while Yamin spoke, but Irod's words made them laugh again.

"I'll do it if you want, Yam," Arshak offered. "My hand is keen as a razor."

Dushan swung his legs slowly to the floor and came out of his stall. He thought that after Arshak's harmless joke they would leave Yamin in peace. But evidently Appak had not had enough yet; he wanted to humiliate his victim still further.

"Wait a minute, Yam. Maybe you're not an Uzbek yourself?" he said menacingly. And these words stung Dushan so sorely that he could not hold back any longer:

"You're almost right, Pak. Yamin is a Bukharan Tajik. You said yourself once that Uzbeks and Tajiks were so alike there was no telling them apart. Do you see the difference now?"

Not only Dushan's words, but the very fact of his intervening in the conversation was so unexpected that for a long time Appak could not find his tongue. He looked at the circle of tensely expectant boys and then said cuttingly:

"And who are you—you Bukharans? Tajik-speaking Uzbeks or Tajiks pretending to be Uzbeks? I've always wanted to ask you: what are you, really? You're an Uzbek with Uzbeks, and a Tajik with Tajiks—always shifty, cagey."

Dushan understood that Appak wanted their argument to end in a fight. But he had taken the wrong tone, and the theme itself could not arouse enough passion, enough anger. He answered carelessly:

"You know, Pak, all these questions of yours are so senseless..."

"No, you answer me. You're not going to get out of it this time."

Now Dushan's expression became even more mocking, scornful. It was the expression he put on when he wanted to show that he regretted having condescended to engage in conversation with someone so dull and empty.

"I am a Maize. You don't know where our homeland is, of course, or where we come from—I remember you were sick when we studied the history of the Maize." Dushan had decided to make a joke of it.

"I don't believe you! There isn't any such nationality," objected Appak. He understood what Dushan was doing, and felt lost: no one could get the better of Dushan in this kind of an argument.

"Yes there is," Dushan insisted. But the others would not let him go on:

"He's trying to fool you, Pak! Maize is the same thing as our djugara. In Africa they call it maize..."

"And that's all the difference there is," said Dushan. "It's the same corn. But I really would like to be a Maize, to belong to that remarkable people who know how to behave with dignity among others. With bad Uzbeks I'm an Uzbek, and with bad Tajiks I'm a Tajik. And with Armenians, I'd like to be an Armenian. To have a voice—do you see, Pak?—to be able to say, 'You're a bad Uzbek.' And when they say, 'But you're an Armenian too,' I can answer, 'Yes, I'm one of you, and they call me a bad Tajik as well. And so I have a share in your badness. If you'll let me, I'll take all of the bad, so you won't have any left.' And then..." Dushan broke off. He realized that unless he took hold of himself he would get carried away and tell many of the things that were troubling him. And all because of the strange state he had been suffering with for the past few days, this numbness. He could only break out of it in nervous, hurried monologues, in a voice that was already on its way to becoming a sob.

Many of the boys were amazed by his speech, so frank and open. Others, though, regarded it ironically, thinking that Dushan wanted to justify himself, to sue for peace with them. Only Irod, it seemed, was truly touched; as Dushan was retreating he exclaimed:

"Well! Now we know who Bukharans really are! "

But Dushan did not hear what followed, what answer the boys made to Irod, who was clearly trying to smooth out the friction between Dushan and all the rest, to make them see that Dushan's strong-headedness did not deserve such severe censure: he was sincere, after all, and stuck to principles. And he spoke with a passion and intelligence that few of the others could match. Dushan got dressed in the entry room and went through the side door into the dormitory to prepare himself for the next day, Sunday, when Mother would come to visit. For the first time, perhaps, he decided to confide in her, to tell her about the oppressive and absurd problems he was having with his classmates. And he thought it might be better if he wrote it all down, so she could read all about it quietly at home and give him her answer next time. He wanted to put down all the details, to explain the psychological and moral reasons he refused to do what was wrong even though a whole group of

people was asking him to, demanding that he do it. It would be his first letter, his first try at understanding and expressing himself in writing, at reaching through words that which he could not reach in living from day to day. After their showers all the boys would go to the recreation room, and until evening Dushan could be alone in the dormitory and concentrate on his writing. He wanted to start, but something deep inside him resisted. What was it? Maybe he feared that in confiding to Mother he would show her his weakness. How could he complain that everyone had turned away from him, when he had always taken pride in his solitude and tried to preserve it? He had never complained when it was hard for him, when others had not understood him and rebuffed him. Why should he open up now?

Not long before, he had spent a whole night thinking about Mother. He had remembered Father too although Mother was still afraid to tell him, he understood already that Father had abandoned them. Dushan had first begun to recognise that when she had busied herself with trifles: who but a woman who had been thrown over, humiliated, and now was confronted with a frightening loneliness could have expended so much feeling on a commission, on a paper cause, getting the director replaced at her son's boarding school?

And wasn't he becoming trifling as well, wasn't his wanting to write this letter evidence of it? Perhaps their whole family was going through a time when characters were debased, a time of worrying with small concerns. Had their blood grown tired and thin? And Dushan decided not to write: he did not want his first letter to be a helpless complaint. Tomorrow, when Mother came, he would know what to do. If it was possible he would try to explain everything to her plainly. And perhaps the miracle would return to them, perhaps the moment would be repeated in which son and mother had breathed together, when he had been a nameless infant in her womb.

It had become a habit with him to come out to the first courtyard, to the awnings where parents and sons met, when all the rest were already there. Mother would be talking with the other women, waiting for him, and when she saw Dushan com-

ing slowly towards her, got to her feet from excitement or some sort of embarrassment. And each time, as she watched him approach, she would feel surprised at his changed appearance, at the way he was always different: he would be quite grown-up, serious with the experience of his fourteen years, and at her next visit he would be still a child, weak and helpless, needing to be comforted and pitied, although out of pride he would not say so. That was how she had seen him last time, and it had made Dushan even more taciturn when he saw from the way Mother spoke to him and looked at him that he seemed defenseless to her.

But today once again he wanted to seem mature and calm, ironic from his sense of inner strength, charming and attentive, a loving son—so that Mother, who was suffering because everything in their house and family had turned out so unfortunately, would be comforted at least for a moment when she saw that there were days, even whole weeks, when Dushan was happy at the school.

“I’ll calm her, and then I won’t be able to tell my story,” thought Dushan as he went out of the dining room after breakfast and headed towards the awning, where Mother would already be waiting for him. “All for nothing... The letter didn’t turn out, either. We could have laughed about something, sat together peacefully for a long time, and then I could have given her the letter as we were saying goodbye.”

He decided to tell her after all, in a playful, humorous way, like a person who decided things on his own but all the same shared odd and amusing situations like this one with those who were dear to him, simply for their enjoyment.

“But of course she will think it must be hard for me, being alone for so many days. She will want to straighten things out, and offer to have Pai-Khambarov make peace between me and the other boys somehow, without seeming to interfere. And I’ll say that I can work it out for myself, but I won’t do what they want me to. And we’ll argue back and forth that way until finally she calls me stubborn.” Dushan slowed his steps, and a gloomy mood came over him. He looked under the awning, taking in its whole length at a single glance: Mother was not in

her usual place. And Arshak's mother, who usually sat at the end of the bench, had settled down comfortably, taking up the spot Dushan's mother usually occupied—it was obvious by now that she was not coming.

The stares of the other boys' mothers—Irod's, and Damirali's, and Shamil's—embarrassed Dushan. He already knew which of them liked him and which regarded him with hostility—not as an ungainly youngster with stooped shoulders and an impassive face, but as the son of his mother. Over the years, Dushan's mother had quarreled with many of the women she met there under the awning on Sundays, and made up with them, heard bitter words of reproach and spoken them herself, become strident and waspish. And all from rivalry: Whose son was brighter, more industrious? Whose husband held the most respectable position? As Dushan stood looking bewilderedly around the courtyard for his mother, he suddenly felt engulfed by all the parental sympathies and antipathies, all the pettiness. He was dismayed and dejected, but then came a flash of saving irony: "And you wanted to tell her—wanted her to listen and admire your strength." The thought stirred Dushan, gave him daring and lightness, as if his disillusionment had begun to break down something in his mind, to dissolve the lump inside him that bore him up, kept him attentive to his conscience, through all the days of his estrangement from the other boys. And as it dissolved, the lump intoxicated him, as if it were made up of some narcotic. Feeling light-headed, he began to bounce down the stairs, taking big jumps. He could hear steps behind him and the clatter of coins: Arshak and Irod and other boys from his class were counting the roubles and kopecks they had begged from their parents.

In front of Dushan the third-graders were crowding into their dormitory, waving their cloth bags full of home-cooked food, eager to begin their bartering: two eggs for a chunk of a sausage, a stuffed eggplant for a meat patty. Dushan's class had done the same when their parents gave them not money but food.

Dushan was filled with the spirit of mischief, caught up in the chase. He looked around and signaled with a wave for his classmates to stay right behind him. The sign was understood:

the boys behind Dushan became watchful and quickened their pace. At the threshold to the dormitory one of the third-graders stumbled and fell. As he was getting up, clutching his bag to his chest, the boys following Dushan mingled in with the third-graders, prodding them through the door.

In the crowd and bustle Dushan had glimpsed the faces of Appak, Shamil, and Damirali. Mordekhai looked at him in surprise, Yamin in consternation. The whole class seemed to have gathered, as if they had known today would be the day they were waiting for: Dushan was ready to pull off an escapade.

“Everybody line up! Make it fast—faces to the wall,” shouted Dushan. Without even thinking of what he was doing, he gave one of the third-graders a shove, but towards the beds, rather than the wall, and snatched the bag out of his hands. In fact, Dushan’s command had sounded a little incongruous: as soon as they saw the older boys chasing them into the dormitory and posting guards beside the tightly shut door, the third-graders had known what was happening. It was not the first time, after all, that they had been plundered of the bags their parents brought them on Sunday visits. They had lined up along the wall with their backs to the looters, trembling, afraid to call for their teacher.

“Here, catch!” Dushan flung a bag to Appak, then one to Yamin, a third to Irod—it all went easily and quickly. As he backed towards the door, surprised at the easy success of their raid, Dushan even regretted that he could not continue it next door, in the dormitory of the fourth-graders. He liked the way the others looked at him, with respect and envy, and the way they followed him, hiding the bags, and then skipping along, satisfied. Appak and Arshak and the rest were glad to see that Dushan was the same as they were—they had robbed boys smaller than themselves any number of times.

They all ran into the recreation room. The first few minutes were spent in silently and intently digging through the sacks, each of them inspecting his booty. Then Appak looked up and said the words Dushan had been waiting for:

“Good going, Shan! We caught them by surprise. Neat work!”

"I'll say," added Irod from a corner of the room. "Like clockwork. Dushan must have been lying awake at night planning the attack." Everybody laughed uneasily.

There was more silent probing of the bags before Appak asked, "Is the door hooked?"

"I locked it myself," answered Mordekhai, who was on duty that day. He took out an egg and laid it on the table in front of him, for some reason looking shyly at Dushan.

The rest also began to fish eggs out of their bags and put them on the table; another and another and another—almost all of them had eggs. They laughed and elbowed each other, and began rolling the eggs across the table. Then an egg was thrown at someone: it hit the wall with a sharp crack and rolled under the table. There was something in all of this horseplay that oppressed and irritated Dushan. Wanting to cut the tension, he stood up and called for silence, waving a tube of ointment he had found in his bag together with the food:

"Listen what this says: 'Syntomicin ointment... Apply to burned area three times daily.' Here's the good part: 'Has a delicate, modern fragrance.' Ha! That's right—our modern times have such a delicate fragrance." He laughed guiltily. "Yes, today and every day this year—has had an amazingly delicate fragrance."

But Dushan was not allowed to express what was building up inside him: the remorse, the disgust at what they were all doing now.

"Yes, if you mean the smell of these eggs," said Appak, getting to his feet. "But that's enough palaver. A teacher might come in here any minute. Somebody should pick up these eggs and throw them away. And all the rest of the stuff too."

"Shan can do the cleaning up," said Shamil, following Appak towards the door.

Dushan was outraged, insulted—as if they had said right out that he was to blame for it all.

"No, Am," he ran after the other boy and grabbed him by the elbow. "You do it. As a favor. I made the mess—you clean it up."

Shamil stepped back, startled, and made as if to take a swing at Dushan.

"In the first place, I'm Sham, not Am. And second, you're wrong if you think this makes you a hero. Ten eggs isn't enough to buy you off—right, Pak? Let's see you really do something—then we can have the peacemaking ceremony."

Appak, his hand on the doorknob, listened. At first his face was indifferent, but about halfway through Shamil's speech his lip curled in obvious scorn for Dushan. But still he did not want to continue the feud with Dushan:

"I don't think I agree with you, Sham. The beginning is the important thing. Today Shan took the first step. You've got to give him credit. Although of course it would take something bigger to show real character. If he puts somebody on the 'bi-cycle', now, that would be different."

"And what about that ointment!" shouted Shamil, unwilling to be mollified. "I hate to tell you, Shan, but everything you do comes out the wrong way, ends up being mean. Why should it be you who gets the bag with the medicine? Some poor third-grader probably really needs that stuff. They put him on the 'bi-cycle', maybe, and the burn is still hurting, so his mother brought him some ointment with a nice smell."

The three of them—Appak, Shamil, and Dushan—stood alone beside the door, hesitating to go out. The rest were still rolling eggs on the table, keeping out of the argument. Their silence embittered Dushan more than Shamil's words—they wanted to watch from the sidelines until they saw who was winning.

"Get away from the door, Pak," Dushan said suddenly. His voice was cold and hard. "Hook it shut again." He tried to collect himself, so he could speak firmly, without fear of blows or ridicule. "Go over there, both of you!" He pointed to a corner. The gesture was so commanding and expressive that Appak and Shamil, a little chagrined, moved away from the door. Dushan went off into the opposite corner and swung his fist at the wall with all his might:

"How dare you condemn me now, Am! All of you... You're the ones who put me up to this. And you, Pak, after all the things you've done, standing in judgement over me to show how noble you are. So gentle, so kind... I did that today so that I

would be like the rest of you donkeys, and now you blame me for bringing you eggs instead of hay. And you're so stupid, Am, you can't even shove them..." Dushan threw himself at Shamil in a blind rage, but the other boy ducked and put out his leg to trip Dushan. He fell, bumping his shoulder into the corner, and Shamil slipped out the door. Appak followed, and then the rest, one by one. As they ran past some of them glanced at Dushan timidly, others with malice.

Dushan felt too weak to get up. The anger, the hatred, had gone out of him all at once, and now he was desolate over his powerlessness, his failure to convince the others.

Mordekhai was the last to leave. He stopped by the threshold and bent over Dushan. He sighed, unable to find the right words. Dushan stared at his yellow boots.

"How strange," Dushan thought. "They're pigskin ... you can tell by the pores, and that greasy look."

"You ought to get up and wash up," said Mordekhai. He spoke sternly, as if Dushan had already refused to do what he was asking. "And forget all this ... meanness." He held out his arm to help Dushan sit up.

Dushan looked his friend straight in the eye; Mordekhai had always liked his frankness.

"But how can I forget?" he asked hoarsely, barely moving his swollen lips. I don't care about all this—about them. It's the hate... That's how it always is: when somebody can't force you to give in, he does all he can to make you hate yourself. Like I do now... I hate myself for what I've done, Mordekhai. You understand—you're smart, sensitive."

And all the rest of that day, free of lessons and duties, Dushan wandered alone through the school's three courtyards, felt as if for the first time the coldness of its corridors, which as usual were filled with crowds of older boys smoking cigarettes. He stood at the edge of the playing field. With every hour it became harder to breathe. There was a tightness in his chest and temples. It was as if everything he had become accustomed to, the entire way of life of the school, its rhythm and routine, had again moved away from him, become alien. It even seemed to him that if he walked out the gates right then and never came

back, no one would notice, as if there had never been a Dushan at the school: neither the right nor the left wall would quake, and his bed would not squeak without its occupant. What was this? Why had his thoughts and feelings reached such an extremity? And it was only when he saw the chairs being carried out of Ablyaasanov's office that Dushan realized that at some point he had ceased to think of his own troubles, and now he was thinking about the director, who would be leaving the school forever the next day. This happened sometimes when he was regretting something he had done or smarting from an insult: suddenly, without even noticing it, he would begin to feel sorry for somebody, to look at everything through another's eyes—it was like a continuation of his own feelings. And now the pain Ablyaasanov must have felt about leaving the school became his, Dushan's. But who was Ablyaasanov to him? Had Dushan cared for him, felt attached to him? No. It was interesting, though, how the old man's feelings had superimposed themselves on his own. Maybe feeling what another felt, putting yourself in his place, meant understanding him. And could it be such understanding that gave birth to either compassion or the desire to humiliate, to hurt?

Pondering these things, Dushan went out of the school gates, past the rows of stalls of Zarmitan's small, gray bazaar, and came to the vacant lot on the left bank of the stream. He stopped, daunted. He did not want to mingle with the crowds of townspeople there, adults and children, all of them in trenches digging up bricks and stacking them in neat rows. The delicate, clinking bricks steamed in the sun. Once they had been part of a wall or the foundation of a house. The previous spring someone had noticed a ringing sound as he was driving an ironstake into the ground here to tether a horse. After digging away a level of clay, he discovered a wall of undamaged bricks—part of a house built before the revolution, which had sunk into the ground. Since then, digging in the vacant lot had become one of Zarmitan's supplementary industries: the townspeople salvaged bricks, half-rotted roof beams, even whole doors with painted ornaments. People came in the morning with food and jugs of water. The ground had been divided into sacrosanct plots. In the

evening, the more enterprising citizens of Zarmitan would buy up what had been extracted during the day and haul it away in cars or two-wheeled wagons for resale to those who were building homes on the other side of the town. At first the boys from the school had sat watching the work in the vacant lot, laughing and shouting:

"Swing those picks! Put your backs into it!" Then, when the joke paled, they began to hop down from the wall where they were sitting to join the work one by one -at first in secret from the rest. The money they made went for cologne, cigarettes, belts. Dushan could see Irod and Shamil at work now. They were scooping clay out of the trenches into baskets to be carried to the edge of the field. When they caught sight of their classmate they waved to him enthusiastically, inviting him to join them at their task. But Dushan turned and walked away indifferently.

Dushan went to bed before supper. He lay in the solitude of the dormitory, feeling as if something was pinning him down. His body seemed to be suffused with blood or bile; it became heavy and strange to him, as if it were separating itself from his soul, his mind. And his mind, taking on some new embodiment, looked down at the blanket-wrapped figure in the bed, disdained it as something unneeded, helpless.

"Yes, I'm repulsive even to myself," thought Dushan.

Late in the evening, when the other boys came into the dormitory and saw that Dushan had already been lying there for a long time, they went to bed quietly, without the usual noise and stamping of feet, trying not to disturb Dushan. They did not even whisper the customary jokes. Only Arshak spoke:

"Where's Pak? I guess he's out sniffing around." Several boys snickered in reply.

Later Dushan heard Aunt Bibisara, the teacher on duty, move stealthily between the rows of beds. She must have been surprised to find the dormitory quiet at such an early hour. Dushan waited to see if she would notice that Appak's bed was empty. When she left, closing the side door softly, he realized Appak must have arranged his blanket to make it look as if someone were lying under it.

And again that strange thing happened: Dushan was more concerned about Appak than himself. He did not even reflect that Aunt Bibisara must know about what he had done that day—of course the third-graders would have complained. But that did not worry him: his self-contempt must have canceled fear of discovery.

It was even worse for some reason when all the rest had gone to sleep. Dushan could scarcely breathe, and there was a lump in his throat that kept him from overpowering his sorrow, from breaking into sobs or crying out. He must contain himself, stop this nervous trembling. He sat up and began to dress hastily.

Outside in the courtyard, which was bathed in the light of the full moon, he stood beside the box filled with sand for fighting fires, breathing the air deep into his lungs. He was watching the windows of the dormitory next door and did not notice Appak creeping towards him, covering the glow of his cigarette with his palm so as not to be seen from the windows opposite, where the duty teachers were still awake.

Finally Dushan caught a whiff of smoke and turned around. He gave a start when he saw that it was Appak.

"Where have you been, Pak? You haven't even been to bed yet." Then he frowned peeishly, displeased with himself for having spoken in such a friendly, natural voice.

Appak grinned in the darkness and stifled a laugh. He was eager to relate his night's adventures, to show how cunning and audacious he was, so Dushan would envy him.

"Yes, I've been out prowling," whispered Appak. "How did you know I wasn't here? I thought the way I fixed the blanket it would fool anybody. Not a word about this, Shando you understand? You're the only one who knows. You guessed, of course. There's no fooling that intuition of yours." Obviously Appak wanted to forget all about their quarrel, but Dushan continued to look sullen, as if nothing Appak said could make any difference to him.

Appak threw his cigarette into the firebox and covered it with sand. Then suddenly he hugged Dushan, began to slap his sides and poke him to bring him out of his sulk.

"Well, all right, I admit I was wrong. Don't go on this way

with me. But what about you? All these years I've tried to be your best friend, but I don't feel anything in return. And so I betrayed you out of spite. Of course it was spite—I have my pride too, and you're so cold to me. But I... But my conscience isn't very strong, I keep throwing it away. I think of you as my conscience, Shan. Just now I had thrown it away again, and then I come back and hear you reproaching me."

Dushan did not know if Appak was sincere or not: the only way someone could talk like that about conscience was if he did not really know what was going on inside himself, and the one whom he called his conscience. And so Dushan's answer was dry and preaching, as if he were indifferent to Appak:

"I don't know... Wouldn't it be better to hold on to your conscience than to look for it in someone else? That's how it seems to me, Pak. And how can I be your conscience, when there is so much bad in me? So much evil... I want to free myself of it, and that's the hardest..."

"Don't say that, Shan." Again Appak put his arms around Dushan, not roughly now but calming, comforting. "I see so much good in you. You're better than I am, I swear to it. And I really do throw my conscience away a lot of the times. Like today."

Appak spoke as if he did not regret his failing, was proud of it: as if conscience was a burden to him. And Dushan was revolted by the false note he caught in those words.

"You speak about it so ... strangely," he said. "It seems you're one of the people who can sell their own consciences so easily, and then refuse to see the slightest fault in someone else's conscience, can't forgive..." Dushan did not finish his thought; he did not like the turn their conversation had taken. He might have said many wounding things to which Appak would not have answered, not being as sincere as Dushan, as passionate. "But wouldn't you rather tell me where you've been?" Dushan smiled encouragingly, comprehendingly.

"You won't tell anyone?" Appak whispered conspiratorially.

"Of course not. Everybody but me knows anyway. I heard them saying you were out sniffing around."

At first Appak was taken aback, but then he laughed quietly:

"So they've been watching, spying on me. That Arshak - I'll wring his neck." He bent to whisper with his hot breath in Dushan's ear: "There's a woman in Zarmitan. A tenth-grader was the first to find about her Idris. You know the kind: divorced, lives with her daughter and her old mother. I got to wondering whose turn it was tonight, and so I hung around her house, snooping." Appak snickered and made to light another cigarette.

"And who was there? Did you see?" Dushan was agitated, his breathing came faster, but he tried to seem unconcerned.

"To tell the truth, I couldn't see plainly. It was either Sardiev, the druggist, or—would you believe it?—our very own Bolotaliev. I swear! It was dark on that side of the street, where her door is. When she opened it there was just a narrow strip of light from inside. And whoever it was slipped in so fast that I couldn't get a good look."

Dushan yawned studiedly, showing that all this interested him very little.

"Let's get some sleep," he said.

But as he lay waiting for sleep to come he thought for a long time about what Appak had told him. He kept trying to imagine what she must look like, that woman. He could not picture her, was not sure it had been Bolotaliev, but still he felt envious of the teacher. He sneered, remembering the man's rather comical walk and the way he devoured bread at mealtimes, holding a piece in each hand and taking bites off each in turn.

Finally Dushan grew calmer. It seemed he would be left in peace, not be summoned to the director for his raid on the third-graders. For a week already they had been living in a sort of interregnum: Ablyasaanov, on his way out, no longer cared to punish offenders, and Pai-Khambarov was still unwilling to do so, as he lacked any special authority.

Not long ago an argument had broken out when just before they went to sleep Appak suddenly asked:

"What do you think—will things be better with the bottle baby as director, or worse?" The nickname he called Pai-Khambarov had originated long before, when they were in fourth grade. Their teacher was fond of talking about himself, and once

in a candid moment he had informed the class that as an infant he had never tasted his mother's milk: it seemed some odor had repelled him, and he refused to take the breast. And so he had been raised on a bottle. The nickname Appak gave him after that confession was the first hint of mockery after three years of adoration and emulation of Pai-Khambarov, who had taught them all their subjects and overseen their upbringing, as well as providing fatherly protection. He had been attentive to their needs, always come to the rescue, never shown favoritism. It was frightening even to think he might have failings, let alone to speak of such a thing. Pai-Khambarov was simply without imperfections. And that nickname, "bottle baby", seemed to express their changing attitude towards him now that they had taken up new subjects, taught by others. It was plainly impossible to worship all their teachers, not because they had glaring faults but merely because the boys had matured and begun to notice the quirks, mistakes, and contradictions in judgement. And all this helped to undo their blind faith and love for their first teacher, Pai-Khambarov, made them look at him more soberly and critically.

But as soon as Pai-Khambarov moved into the director's office, on the very first day of the "new order", life at the school began to be reformed: the pace quickened, as if a lagging clock had been wound up tight again, and the days were planned out to the minute, so that everyone felt the order and discipline, the fullness of the day from getting up on schedule until bedtime came once more. Groups were organized for the pursuit of stamp-collecting and rabbit-raising, for boys interested in metalwork, cooking, and Russian and Uzbek folk instruments. The day could no longer contain all this activity, came unhinged: at noontime, or closer to sunset, each day would burst open, and everyone would feel as if they could not bear the load any longer. They grumbled, but continued to do the things their progressive principal had ordained for them. The older teachers, headed by Ayyazov, proudly left. Aunt Bibisara, who had changed her *Zarmitan* flowered dress for a European skirt, more convenient for rushing about, bore the strain out of

her tender feelings towards Pai-Khambarov, which had still not completely died away.

Dushan, with his native cautiousness, spent a long time deciding which of the clubs he should join, so as to be among nice boys, like Mordekhai, and meanwhile all the others had joined together according to their tastes and talents. In the end Dushan was forced to join the boys who were learning to play Uzbek folk instruments—fortunately the orchestra was not yet complete. It was discovered right away that Dushan had no ear for music or sense of rhythm, but nonetheless he remained in the club—he could not simply be left out of the cultural program, after all.

Almost every evening “two hours of dancing” were held for the older boys. Besides the tanobar, lyazgi, rokhat, and oyo-kuyin,* they learned European-Oriental hybrids the Bukhara Waltz, the Andizhan Polka, the Pskent Foxtrot, the Turkestan Tango. Dushan danced badly, always stumbling after the first two steps. He sneered to the equally tangle-footed Mordekhai:

“So this is where ‘bottle baby’ has got us with his modern ideas—Goethe’s East-West Divan.”

And so they danced, clowning and making snide jokes, until the announcement came that the next day, a Sunday, girls from the Tashlak boarding school had been invited to be their guests. The news was at first greeted with dismay, but after the boys had thought it over there was such rejoicing that even Dushan was caught up in the bustle, nervous anticipation, and preparations. Cologne was produced from secret hiding places, and Appak spent the whole day trimming the scarcely detectable fuzz on his upper lip with a safety razor. Buttons were sewn onto jackets, trousers and collars were pressed—the steam coming from under the irons during this unaccustomed task made the boys sneeze.

For a long time they could not get to sleep, kept talking about the next day. How would their luck with dance partners be? It was prophesied that Irod would have to dance with a lame girl, and Arshak, the shortest of them, would be stuck

* Uzbek national dances.

with a basketball player, two meters tall. A lovely girl would come up to Mordekhai at the "ladies' choice" and invite him to waltz. Half blind with joy, he would put an arm around her waist, tenderly press the hand she offered—and freeze with horror, scream so that the whole dance floor would turn and look, when he felt the web of goosey flesh between the thumb and index finger of his enchanting partner.

"What a lot of nonsense!" Mordekhai said, hiccuping from the chill terror that had seized him.

"Those are demon-women," explained Damirali. "I've heard if one of them gets hold of you there's no escape—you wither away, die an early death from consumption." Seeing that no one was particularly affected by his words—not even Mordekhai responded—Damirali tried to continue the banter on another tack: "I wonder if any of the girls will dance with Yamin. Maybe they'll all sense he's been marked by the Devil and stay clear of him."

It seemed Yamin wanted to answer this himself: he got to his knees on his bed, glaring in outrage. But for some reason the boys' tittering offended Dushan even more sharply and quickly. He threw off the blanket, sat up, and looked scornfully at Damirali:

"That's nothing but a mean joke, Dam. Mean and heartless. You know how it hurts Yam. You don't have any wisdom." He caught Yamin looking at him with anguish and gratitude.

"Don't have any wisdom," mocked Damirali. But he could think of nothing more to say. He knit his brows menacingly, ready for a fight. Seeing this, Appak hastened to smoothe things over:

"That's enough, fellows! On an evening like this..." He began to sing, gesturing comically: "Tomorrow the world will be ours, all of its beauty, all of its beauties." He broke down laughing, and then went on in a different tone: "I remember you were talking about wisdom, Shan. You wanted to tell about some classification you had come up with. Let's hear it—it ought to be interesting."

This suggestion appeased Dushan. He liked to edify the other boys, to surprise and even shock them.

"Not all of it is mine, Pak," he answered smoothly. "Part of it my grandmother told me. She was an educated woman, religious, one of the 'old school', as they say. All I did was add a little, and put it into a kind of system. Well so: A person who is just clever understands everything, but almost never follows his own conscience, the deepest demands of his soul. Everything in his mind has been acquired, but not truly spiritualized, and because of that he seldom has lofty thoughts. He likes to act, and everything he does is directed towards externals, the world. And so a lot of evil results. An intelligent person sees into things more deeply and keenly than one who is merely clever. He is made up of opposing parts, positive and negative, and so he is more cautious and discreet with the world. He doesn't direct everything towards the outside—he thinks about his soul too. But a wise person sees everything in harmony, and is attuned to himself. He checks the conclusions of his mind against his heart, and knows how to behave so as not to cause trouble to others. Wisdom is a way of living, not a philosophy."

For a time it was silent in the dormitory as the boys thought over what Dushan had said. Nobody seemed to want to argue. Only Testosterone objected, and at that not because he had thought of something more cogent, some refutation, but only out of his usual desire to contradict Dushan:

"You're wrong, Shan. Cleverness doesn't have to be nasty or wicked." But no one supported him. Probably all the boys were thinking about their coming encounter with the girls from Tashlak, and had no desire to argue about abstractions. All they wanted to talk or think about was the girls.

Dushan was waiting for silence to fall in the dormitory, for everyone to go to sleep, so that as the others snored and groaned, dreaming of the pure and innocent girls from Tashlak, he could think about the idea that had tantalized him all day, and could now be avoided no longer: Appak had pointed the divorced woman out to him—they had seen her by chance in the town. It had been agreed that they would hide near her house tomorrow night and watch yet another of her admirers arrive. They had not known then about the girls; now they had postponed the exploit.

And really, it was like an obsession: for three nights now he had remembered every detail. He and Appak had gone into a store to buy brilliantine for their hair, and Appak, slightly alarmed, had grabbed his hand. With his eyes he pointed at a woman who was talking with the salesgirl. Dushan did not understand, and Appak had shoved him further away from the counter and whispered:

"That's her—don't you remember? I told you how I watched her house one night." On hearing those words Dushan shuddered, as if the woman would look at him in a moment and guess that he was thinking about her, although he did not yet know what she was like. Appak returned to the counter for the brilliantine, and Dushan stood by the door looking at the woman in her red dress, which emphasized her full figure. He ran his eyes furtively over her bare arms, from the shoulder all the way down to her fingers, and was filled with a sense of secrets, prohibitions, of something forbidden and shameful which aroused the imagination, made it daring. Seeing that the salesgirl was saying goodbye to the woman, Dushan slipped out of the store and ran around the corner. He was sure that she would take the same road. His hands grew cold from agitation, and the heat collected in his cheeks. He listened to the click of a woman's shoes approaching, rounding the corner.

"No, she didn't see me. She won't guess," thought Dushan with relief. He walked slowly, as if he were out for a stroll, and became more and more ruffled as she approached. At the moment she came up with him, and moved a little ahead, Dushan smelled something unfamiliar, something new and piercing: the fragrance of her hair and her naked arms. Suddenly he was seized with an unbearable longing to touch her shoulder and then, satisfied, run away. Unable to resist, he raised his hand. And only now, when all his senses were heightened, did he notice a small brown birthmark on the white skin. It was only a brief glimpse, but Dushan shrank back from it, sobered and ashamed, and stopped automatically, not wanting to go any farther, as if merely to catch sight of the birthmark on the woman's shoulder were enough to overwhelm him with the feeling of a life of which he knew nothing, as if he saw her childhood and all her

life up to that day and measured it with his sorrow and bitterness. Her whole appearance radiated humanity, the things that had to be overcome, ridiculed, debased to immorality so as to pursue sensual desires with intrigues, spying, deceit, and sinfulness.

The woman must have sensed that Dushan had stopped. She looked around, met his steady, penetrating gaze, and shivered: no one had ever looked at her that way before. She smiled meekly at Dushan and hurried on. Satisfied that she had noticed him, that she would remember him, he ran back to where Appak was walking nervously back and forth outside the store, looking for him. When asked where he had been, Dushan answered with a line from a song, the only one, unfortunately, that he recalled:

“The leaf is green, and green the dress the mantis wears.”

He was silent the whole way back, as often he was when excitement left him and all that remained was stark reflection on what had occurred. And he returned to the cares of the day. It was only that night, when he remembered about the woman as he was dropping off to sleep, that he felt the shock again through his lassitude and drowsiness, the “motor excitation”, as he called it—that feverish feeling when a thought becomes obsessive, when the mind goes over and over one experience. He put aside all the non-essentials and gathered up everything that was most disturbing, beginning his meditation not with the moment when Appak had pointed out the woman in the store—he did not feel anything poignant in that—but with his solitary inspection of her figure, those arms bare to the shoulder and the legs covered with white dust up the ankles.

“Would she have shouted from surprise if I had touched her shoulder?” thought Dushan. “My hand went up by itself, it felt numb, I couldn’t control it. It must be because all my feelings had gathered together in desire. But where is desire? In the heart? But I don’t love her. No, I do love her now, but not all of her, only her bare arms. And if she washed her feet, would I love them? They would be white—she never goes out in the sun. And I fell in love with that smell. What is it that makes her hair smell that way? What is she really like? There was no smell of

comfort, of home. Probably because so many men visit her all that has evaporated, and she has been soaked in perfume and creams. 'A delicate, modern fragrance.' She has made me love that fragrance. And suddenly that birthmark, like something forbidden, a reminder." From persistent repetition his memories lost their sensuousness, their allure, and became mere cold, precise thoughts no longer connected with what he had experienced. He had waited impatiently for Sunday evening so that he could see the woman in a new way from behind the corner of her house, fill himself again with living impressions of her speech and movements, her whole appearance. Then he would go through all of it again and again, not sharing with anyone, concealing his jealousy of her admirers. Although there was really not much jealousy; he had not seen the men, and it was useless to guess whether it had been the druggist or Bolotaliev. The main thing he had received from her was this pleasant uneasiness, this "motor excitation". Even if she had a hundred lovers, her charm was enough to fill all his sensations with eagerness, impatience.

When she came that Sunday morning, Mother could not help but notice the strange excitement in her son, always so melancholy and dispassionate. And all through the school there was something stirring.

"Why is it you're all so—talkative today?" she asked, looking with surprise at Arshak, who was sitting with his mother, and at Irod.

Dushan was a little embarrassed, as if he had been caught at something. He said as if none of this concerned him:

"Some girls from Tashlak... They're coming here today. You know—an exchange of visits. We'll go there sometime later on. They say Pai-Khambarov already finds the school confining, wants to take over the Tashlak school little by little, combine it with ours."

"Is that so? Yes, he's very energetic, very well-informed and up-to-date as a director." Mother, too, was trying to conceal what she was really thinking. "Ah, Dushan, Dushan, how time flies! Girls coming to visit you already..." Suddenly her voice broke, and she buried her face in her son's shoulder to hide her

tears. Dushan took her hand. From her trembling, he realized that she was struggling to overcome something. And he had not noticed: he was always inattentive as he approached her.

"And you know," she raised her head abruptly and looked dry-eyed at her son, although her tears had left spots on his shoulder. "Amon is getting married soon... She's a nice girl you probably remember her: Mavlyuda. She lives on the other side of the vacant lot."

Dushan did not remember, but he was genuinely excited and amused to hear that his brother would soon be married.

"Somehow I can't believe it... Amon... Well, good for him. Where are they going to live?"

"In the new part of town. Mavlyuda's father is getting them an apartment in a five-story building."

Only now did Dushan realize: Mother was different, not like she always was. And then he understood that what had sometimes irritated him—the exaggerated vivacity and nervous gaiety she had at the school—had disappeared.

There was something weary and tragic in her eyes now, as if whatever it was that kept her from being as she had always been, calm, sober-minded, and kind, had gone away forever, freeing her true feelings. Seeing her so sincere and natural, Dushan suddenly saw the reason for it all, and unintentionally said aloud: "It was Father..." Now he felt all the sorrow and pain his Mother had never spoken of. She heard his words only faintly, and thought he had spoken not in comprehension and certainty but questioningly, puzzled.

"You wonder about Father?" she said, looking directly into Dushan's eyes, unafraid to let her son see her failures. She had long felt certain that he had sensed the truth, and suffered from it, and perhaps already grown reconciled. "Your Father is living with another woman—married to her. I hid it from you for four years, Dushan. Forgive me. But you're so sensitive—you've known for a long time. He went to Tashkent with her," Mother added, as if this had all been many years ago.

For some reason Dushan felt ashamed. He hung his head, as if he had seen something dishonorable, some secret from the life of his mother and father. That secret held so much sorrow, and

injustice, and self-interest, and malice, that he felt many of his treasured ideas had been shattered. All he could say was:

“Yes, I knew... and cried.” Suddenly he actually did begin to cry from having said that word, lied. He took Mother’s arm and walked with her in the crowd of women towards the gate. He said passionately, sincerely: “If Amon gets married... Remember what I always said—I’ll say it again now: I won’t ever get married. Our old house... I’ll protect you.”

“You’re a good son.” Dushan’s unexpected and heartfelt outburst had touched his mother so that she could not say more. She was surprised and glad: it had been long since she felt in him the compassion of flesh and blood. She thought he had grown cold, indifferent. Now, suddenly, he had opened up, and with such feeling that she was afraid to believe her ears. “I know I haven’t been a good mother. I couldn’t give you enough warmth, tore you away from your home...”

Dushan accompanied her to the car, and then stood alone for a long time at the edge of the road, thinking. What would Mother do now? Where was she going? How would fate look at her, now that she was calm, had stopped fussing with trifles? Would it take pity? Absorbed in these speculations, Dushan did not notice when a bus pulled up at the gate, bringing the girls from Tashlak, and everyone—the hosts and their guests—had assembled in the third courtyard to get acquainted. Dushan wanted to hide in the corridor, but Pai-Khambarov noticed him and called for him to join the ranks of boys, interrupting his welcoming speech to do so. As Dushan moved past the lines of girls and boys they all looked at him and smiled for some reason, as if he had committed some trespass.

Dushan stood between Appak and Mordekhai, at first unable to understand, in his agitation, what it was that Pai-Khambarov was talking about so exaltedly, wanting to make a good impression on everyone. But somehow it occurred to Dushan that if the ninth and tenth grades of their school were assembled here there must likewise be girls from two grades.

“Yes, and two teachers.” Dushan saw the women standing behind the ranks of girls. In some way they reminded him of Aunt Bibisara, and that similarity put him at ease at last,

emboldened him. He began to look one by one at the girls, into those open faces without a hint of coquetry or bashfulness—their teachers must have impressed on them back at Tashlak that they were being taken to yet another formal occasion, like the times they had gone to Bukhara in a group to visit a theater or museum, and that they must show they were properly brought up, modest, so the rakish boys at Zarmitan would not be able to think ill of their school's morals. The lecture must have been very long and earnest: the faces of the girls seemed to have locked forever into expressions of indifference and icy inaccessibility as they faced the rows of boys, who were shifting impatiently from foot to foot, shoving one another, and giggling.

"And so—welcome!" Pai-Khambarov concluded at last. According to the pre-arranged plan, which Dushan had arrived too late to hear, the boys rushed forward to make acquaintance with their guests, each of them shaking ceremoniously the hand of the girl that had pleased his eye as he eagerly scanned the ranks of Tashlak pupils. Once the acquaintance had taken place, the gentlemen were to be attentive and hospitable to the ladies until farewells were said at the end of the day.

For a minute Dushan was dazed by the merry bustle and lagged behind. When at last, flustered, he joined the mingled crowd of boys and girls (the frigid remoteness of the latter had vanished without a trace), he was drawn as if by instinct, by a feeling of inner affinity, to a quiet girl with a sickly air, standing a little apart and obviously nervous that no one had chosen her yet as a partner. Dushan made a little bow and held out his hand, but forgot to make his face friendly and open.

"Vazira," she drawled in reply, and brightened, as if the unpronounced name had constrained and oppressed her. She looked curiously at Dushan, intrigued by the gloomy face that looked back into her trustful eyes.

They had no time to say anything more: everybody started off for the library, where the guests' tour of the school was to begin.

Taking the girls' arms cautiously, the boys conducted them through the narrow corridor. Dushan was separated from Vazi-

ra, and found himself walking beside Yamin, who was without a partner. Dushan could see by the expression on his face that he was suffering, fearful of the taunts of his classmates. Instead of trying to cheer him up, Dushan suddenly whispered his most carefully guarded secret, the thing that he hid from everyone, suffering in solitude:

“You know, Yamin, my father left us.” Perhaps he felt that his tragedy could console Yamin somehow in his lesser trouble, draw him nearer. But he immediately regretted having said that, not because Yamin’s answer displeased him (“I’ve known for a long time – you told me before.”), but from hurt pride. And because he had already confided in Yamin and now his having broken down, confessed, made him seem impulsive, importunate.

Yamin wanted to say something more, perhaps something friendly, consoling, which would correct his slip. But Vazira was waiting for Dushan at the exit from the corridor, peering near-sightedly into the crowd. He went to her, leaving behind the chagrined Yamin, who had thought that Dushan too was without a partner.

Dushan conducted Vazira in silence through the second courtyard towards the library, feeling her quizzical gaze: she could not understand his strange bewilderment.

“Chin up, Shan!” called Appak, poking Dushan in the ribs as he went past. His whole manner was outgoing, affable, charming. He turned to wink at Dushan and have a look at Vazira, and at the same time his partner turned too. She seemed to have been infected with Appak’s own mood: laughing, looking around at everything, she was like an incarnation of carelessness, beauty, and health.

“Vazira!” She waved to her friend, glanced at Dushan, and hurried on, dancing along in step with Appak.

“That’s Karima,” sighed Vazira, and looked at Dushan reproachfully: she found his silence disheartening.

“Oh?” Suddenly, as if he had just woken up, Dushan smiled wanly, painfully—it was an effort for him to put on a friendly look. “And that fellow with her, Appak—what do you think of him?”

"I don't know him, but it seems he must be like Karima somehow. She's so wonderful—not a speck of cunning, just pure gladness—waltz, waltz, waltz! She started going with boys before all the rest of us—in seventh grade. So many romances, so much tragedy! But you're funny—it's like you're all wound up inside, can't relax." She spoke lightly, so as not to hurt his feelings, and then smiled gently.

"Why do you ... all of a sudden..." Dushan was about to be angry, but restrained himself. As he walked gloomily behind Vazira along the bookshelves, he could not make up his mind whether to be amazed at her perceptiveness or offended that in the very first moments of their acquaintance she had dared to say such a thing, as if she were reproaching him, accusing.

As they walked up and down on both sides of the long shelves, the couples looked not at the books but at each other, as if they were displaying the merits of their partners. Irod went past with a solemn face, which comically emphasized the length of his nose. The girl he was with was not lame, though. She was chubby, with a round face, and also wore a solemn look, evidently in imitation of her partner.

"That's right, Irod, love is a solemn business," Dushan wanted to whisper to him. But then he saw Arshak and nearly broke out laughing: the undergrown relation of a Bukharan jeweler really had been stuck with a tall, rather awkward girl a head and a half taller than he was.

"I like them tall and stately, like the cedars of Lebanon," Arshak had joked. Recalling that, Dushan cheered up and forgot about wanting to be offended at Vazira. He began to look around the room for Appak and Karima, and went towards the door to see them better. Vazira did not notice his departure.

Absorbed in one another, oblivious of everyone else in the crowded library, the two of them were paging through some thick book, laughing and making jokes. They were so natural and engaging. Dushan choked back a momentary jealousy and looked admiringly at Karima, comparing himself to Appak with his thousands of faults, his dullness and imperfections.

Then he went up to them, surprised at his own boldness, not fearing to seem ridiculous to Karima. He wanted to see

what it was in her that attracted him—the color of her skin, the smell of her hair, her pert figure, her legs? (The experience his senses had gained from the woman whose house he and Appak had decided to watch was still small, incomplete.) But before he could get a good look at Karima, Appak caught sight of him and hugged him open-heartedly, inviting him into their company. He said to Karima:

“This is Dushan. He said a smart thing about this writer, Timurov: ‘It’s time they gave him the Nobel frock-robe.’ Wasn’t that it, Shan?”

“Not quite, Pak, but still...” Dushan muttered. He had not expected to be quoted by Appak. He too picked up a book of Timurov’s and began to leaf through it.

“What did you say, then?” Karima looked playfully at him over Appak’s shoulder. Meeting Dushan’s eyes, she shivered. Dushan smiled, wanting to make a favorable impression. He had meant to make some jest, but only nodded, thinking, “They made friends so fast, but she shivers when she looks at me.” He followed them out of the library and once again saw Vazira standing alone.

“Excuse me,” he said jokingly. “We keep losing each other. I promise it won’t happen again.” And all the rest of the day, in the classrooms, workshops, and gymnasium, he tried to stay next to Vazira, who seemed to be nervous and upset that Dushan did not like her. He sat beside her in the dining room at dinner, wondering why he could feel nothing for her, no matter how he tried—he sensed that he himself interested her, that perhaps she even liked him. She seemed in every way better than Karima: she was calm and observant—she had seen the knot constraining Dushan at first glance—and her face was more delicate and charming than the other girl’s. But his eyes kept moving down the long table to the merry, rather coarse, but beautifully proportioned and athletic Karima, although he understood that he could never feel at ease with her, as he did now with Vazira, could never attract her attention—she would shudder at his penetrating, intent gaze and turn away, comprehended but inaccessible.

“I saw through her right away too,” Dushan thought as he

passed a dish of salad to Vazira. "She's the sort that is a little timid and dull by nature. They take a long time to fall in love, agonizing, doubting, thinking everything over. Their feelings come and go, and sometimes they quarrel with their chosen one, even hate him. That's until they are caught up by a strong, blind passion. Then they become the man's slave, ready to sacrifice everything, suffering pain and insults in silence, although sometimes they become jealous, vengeful, or hysterical. It's smarter to stay clear of that kind," decided Dushan, concluding his psychological analysis. He was delighted with himself for what he thought was a keen understanding of women.

"Do you see now that I was right?" asked Vazira unexpectedly.

"About what? Pardon me," Dushan returned in the same airy tone.

"About Karima. Don't you think she's carefree, doesn't ask anything of life?"

"Carefree?" Dushan thought he saw an illogicality. "But being carefree and not making any demands on life are different things, even opposite. A carefree person, if you will forgive me, is a simpleton. But someone who makes no demands on life is wise, makes things easier for himself by having no desire."

Vazira listened, looking him straight in the eye, glad of his sudden talkativeness and interesting observations.

"Maybe I didn't put it clearly?"

"No, you put it very well," said Dushan. "The one who is called a simpleton is truly wise—only a wise person is not afraid of being called simple."

Somehow Vazira was not pleased with the turn the conversation was taking, and she hastened to elucidate:

"What you say is very interesting. But I'm a good friend of Karima's, and I can tell you there's not a drop of wisdom in her."

"Maybe—I don't know her, after all. And then, why should a woman be wise?" Suddenly he felt bored by their talk, and looked intently at Mordekhai's girl—small and dark, with a sharp chin—wanting to see whether her fingers were webbed like a goose's, whether she was the "demon-woman" the boys had

prophesied for him. Seeing how deftly she used her knife and fork, he nodded to Mordekhai and held up his five fingers to show that the girl was all right.

Mordekhai understood, but instead of praising Dushan's partner in return he put on a pensive face, puffed up his cheeks and stroked them with his palms, as if to say: "So cold and remote—a professor. Are you talking philosophy?"

"It's true," thought Dushan, "she doesn't interest me. Here we are talking about all sorts of dull things." He looked with displeasure at Vazira, who seemed to be unhappy, staring down red-faced into her plate. Opposite them, to their right and left, boys and girls were talking easily, laughing, making fun of their classmates and teachers, boasting, swaggering, discussing the simple, ordinary things that interested them: blue jeans, hockey, kinds of dogs and cars, donkeys that had lost their owners and gone wild. It was interesting to watch how the boys acted, as if they had put on masks, disguised themselves, in an effort to please. Mordekhai, always quiet and rueful, had suddenly become energetic and talkative with his Sara, and the spiteful, malicious Damirali had turned genial, even unctuous: he seemed to be about to shed tears of tenderness as he looked at Saida, a girl with a haughty face and narrow, shifty eyes like a mouse's. Appak was the only one who was himself—high-spirited and a bit brassy, without a shade of doubt or nervous melancholy. He was engrossed in his Karima, diverting her, making her laugh.

Dushan, too, was himself, which was why he and Vazira were bored, could barely keep a conversation going. After each long pause, they would try to find a more suitable topic, but only irritated one another more and more—they did not know how to be simple and natural, like Appak and Karima.

"Why is it so hard?" Dushan wondered. "She's a nice, quiet girl, won't hurt my feelings. It must be that I'm so clumsy." And he looked at the table in the far corner, where the teachers were eating, both guests and hosts. At the head of the table sat the witty and charming Pai-Khambarov. Dushan saw the women teachers from Tashlak looking at him adoringly, interrupting one another, vying for his attention. Everyone had

forgotten Aunt Bibisara, who sat beside him glum-faced and jealous.

"He's irresistible, our 'bottle baby,'" thought Dushan. "I should have learned from him how to get along with people, instead of those silly lessons—chemistry, physics, things I still don't understand. But I've been indifferent to him since third grade."

Dushan looked down the whole length of the table at the boys and girls. The general conversation dictated at the beginning by laws of etiquette had died away in trivialities. Now each pair was busy with its own conversation, pursuing more intimate themes not to be shared with their neighbors. And all those dozens of conversations merged into a solid wall, past which Appak and Karima were moving unnoticed towards the exit.

Dushan was so startled by his friend's boldness that he got halfway out of his chair, wanting to see whether Pai-Khambarov had noticed. The director continued to talk; he did not see, or was pretending not to. When Dushan sat back down again, squirming with anxiety, Appak and Karima had already left the room.

"Where has he taken her?" Dushan wondered in distress. "Could he ... kiss her so soon?" Suddenly he turned to Vazira and said as if asking her forgiveness, her compassion:

"Excuse me for acting this way. I had some bad news—it's all because of that, a coincidence."

"What was it, if you don't mind my asking?" Vazira seemed almost to chirp with pleasure. "Maybe I can help?"

And somehow her excited interest put Dushan off again. Her eagerness to offer banal consolations, to meddle in his personal problems, seemed to Dushan an intrusion: everything that was most cherished ought to be kept within, not revealed to anyone or shared. Perhaps it was to stifle his irritation, not to seem once more so unbearably dull, that Dushan suddenly got up and whispered to Vazira:

"Let's go outside. Don't be afraid." He rose from the table, making way for the girl to precede him. She was delighted with his idea, and he walked after her straight and proud, not sneak-

ing, like Appak. He was pleased with his own daring, as if he were admiring himself from the side.

It was a pity all the other pairs were too preoccupied with each other to notice how Dushan led his partner to the exit. It was only when they were at the very door, when Dushan had put one foot across the threshold, that Pai-Khambarov's voice asked:

“What is the meaning of this, Dushan?”

Dushan looked calmly towards the teachers' table in the far corner and answered:

“Thank you for the dinner!” He could feel himself rapidly losing his proud, independent bearing, becoming an ordinary naughty boy under the reproachful gaze of the teachers both his own and the ones from Tashlak. “We're going for a little walk in the courtyard.” He moved again towards the door, hearing the Tashlak teachers reproving Vazira, who was still rooted to the spot with dismay:

“What are you doing, Vazira? Shadyeva, come back in here! For shame!”

“Come back to me, and I'll forgive you,” the girls began to sing together to the blushing Vazira, who nonetheless followed Dushan out into the courtyard. She laughed with pleasure at having overcome her shyness, and held her hand out to Dushan, as if surrendering to the power of his protection, friendship, and generosity.

Dushan took her hand and together they ran towards the corridor, away from the dining-room windows. Vazira said approvingly:

“You're very decisive, it seems. Not like me—I'm such a little coward.”

He only smiled condescendingly in reply, feeling that the sight of the empty courtyard was robbing him of his fire, his daring; the charm of this game would not last even to the first corridor. He frowned, and again became cold and distant. It seemed to him that Vazira's encouragement and approval weighed on him, restricted him. She did not know that Dushan feared every kind of excess: high praise, unbounded joy, wild merriment. He could not accept them, fearing

the disappointment that came afterwards.

"We aren't the only ones, you know." He wondered whether Vazira had noticed Appak and Karima leaving.

"Yes, our friends were the first to get the idea. It was so boring in there—everybody chewing and chewing."

"So you see," he said ironically and nervously, no longer able to keep up his act. "There are others more decisive than we." Squeezing her hand hard, he ran towards the recreation room in the second courtyard. Somehow he was certain that Appak and Karima would be hiding there.

Vazira ran with him for a ways alongside the wall of the classroom. She had guessed what it was he was looking for in his unbridled excitement and stubbornness, but once again forced herself to be condescending, patient, and restrained. Then she stopped suddenly, almost at the threshold of the recreation room, and nearly broke into tears. Dushan, to her surprise, seemed not to notice or understand what had happened. He took a few steps further on his own, too excited to stop now, rushed into the anteroom, and pulled the door open sharply.

Startled by the squeak, Appak and Karima turned around for a moment, Dushan had time to observe that his friend was holding the girl firmly around the waist and trying to kiss her. But Karima, bending her head back and arching her lithe body, was fighting him off. Their struggle was like a dance: they swayed back and forth, laughing.

"Pardon me. You ought to shut the door," Dushan said in a calm, even cynical voice, trying to curb his jealousy. An instant later he regretted having spoken: Karima looked at him with scorn and turned her back abruptly, as if she suspected him of something. But Appak, trying to smooth over the unpleasantness, asked amiably:

"What did you want, Shan? Really—the door. Guess I'm still new at this. Where's your Vazira? You can take her next door, to the dormitory."

Dushan did not like the free-and-easy way Appak spoke, and slammed the door in his face. He ran into the courtyard, remembering how unworthily and unmanfully he

had behaved with Vazira.

He circled the whole courtyard, then went through the corridor to the playing field. He returned to the dining room just at the moment when everyone was leaving it to go to the clubhouse. Seeing Dushan walking alone behind all the rest with a guilty look, Pai-Khambarov dropped back from the crowd to say quietly:

"I understand, of course, Temuri girls, excitement. You want to show them how brave and confident you are. But remember that courage doesn't necessarily mean wildness, disrespect for discipline. On the contrary. To have courage means to be patient, and without that you'll never be successful with the girls—I know. So I'm asking you—no more stunts..."

"But I'm not wild at all," Dushan wanted to protest. But he kept silent. "I'm careless, like Appak, clumsy," he thought bitterly.

"The girl you chose to make friends with is very nice," Pai-Khambarov whispered paternally, bending over Dushan. "I can tell about these things. There's something in her, a spark, although she seems so prim. I congratulate you, my friend, and ask once more that you behave properly, with a sense of dignity and proportion. After all, these girls weren't invited here to win your eternal love, but only for a little friendly socializing, to ennable your rough hearts."

"I see, for educational purposes. Will we be making a return visit?" Dushan asked, not knowing what to say. In reply Pai-Khambarov laughed complacently:

"Can't wait?" As he hurried to catch up with the women teachers he added: "I'm grateful that at last something at the school here has got your interest, Temuri."

As they crossed the two courtyards and went down the corridors to the clubhouse, Dushan looked around worriedly for Vazira. He wanted to go right up to her and ask her forgiveness: only a cad could behave that way—ask a girl away from the table, flirt with her, lead her on, and then run, holding her hand, to another, the one you wanted to see, were jealous of. And he was shocked when he saw Vazira in the crowd, walking side by side with Yamin, who was so overcome with bashfulness that he

could not think what to say to her—all he did was nod eagerly in assent to her every word.

“What does he see in her?” thought Dushan, remembering the sorry face Yamin had worn ever since morning. He had kept apart from the noise and gaiety, afraid that one of the boys would begin to shout, “Yamin, Yamin, remember! Amen.”

Shamil had thought up that silly, teasing chant the night before. He said that if Yamin forgot about his “mark” and went up to one of the Tashlak girls to make friends, he would hear a voice cooing from the crowd: “Yamin, remember! Amen.”

Poor Yamin must have been so delighted when a girl spoke to him, moved to pity by his woeful look, that he forgot about Shamil’s warning. He walked along beside Vazira, blushing like a shy girl, and there was something about him that disturbed Dushan.

“Well all right, let her be with Yamin,” thought Dushan. “It will encourage him. If only Shamil doesn’t spoil it with his silliness.” He was unpleasantly surprised at the envy he now felt for Vazira, too, and to keep it from taking hold of him he began to make his way through the crowd to Shamil, to give him a word of warning. But it was clear Shamil was absorbed in his Kharisa, did not hear or see anything else, and Dushan dropped behind again. It seemed Dushan was the only one who saw Appak and Karima come running out of the recreation room. They mingled with the crowd pressing into the clubhouse and taking seats there. Dushan stood by the door. Vazira gave a long, triumphant glance as she walked down the rows of seats and took a place not far from her friend Karima.

“It’s all just a game,” Dushan thought to console himself. “Only a lot of fuss and play-acting.”

Suddenly he remembered that he ought to be backstage: the program called for both folk-music ensembles—the Russian and the Uzbek—to perform for the guests.

On stage Dushan was once more collected, keen, taut as a string with fear he would make some mistake, and he continued that way till the end of the concert. He saw Vazira and Yamin talking animatedly about something. Appak winked encouragingly, and Karima looked at him with large, round eyes: she

could scarcely believe that Dushan, who had seemed to her unpleasant and importunate, could play so well, sitting calm and dignified with everyone watching him.

Then the beginning of the dance was announced, and the musicians jumped right down from the stage into the audience to embrace their partners and twirl with them to the strains of a Bukharan Waltz coming from the loudspeaker. Dushan stood by the wall, with a growing sense that he had been wronged. But by whom? He watched the dancers, squinting ironically. How could he be so wounded by those two couples Appak and Karama, Yamin and Vazira? The four of them danced close to one another, almost touching, and kept laughing slyly about something: of course they were discussing him, Dushan.

"They're all thinking how irresistible they are. And I'm the only one without a partner that's what they're whispering about. Yamin is trying so hard!" And again the jealousy awoke in Dushan. It became difficult to breathe, and his cheeks blazed as if the noise, the shuffling of feet, and the laughter were lashing his face like waves.

"They can all go to the Devil," thought Dushan. "This isn't for me. Merrymaking just isn't my element." And he made towards the door. But with each step he felt more strongly that his flight did not show the strength of a solitary individual who despised gaudy show, sparkling color, and seductive sound. Rather, it betrayed weakness: a person should be at home in all worlds, should be able to behave with ease where feckless gaiety was called for, where rhythm, beauty, and flirtatiousness held sway. Thinking this, Dushan stopped sharply at the very threshold and returned to the hall. He caught Vazira looking at him anxiously, obviously not wanting him to go away.

Her glance made Dushan bold, but did not put him at ease. Instead something resentful awoke in him. He turned gloomy as he went back to where he had been standing, and watched Yamin censoriously, waiting for him to look in his direction and realize he had gone too far in his attentions to Dushan's girl.

But Yamin was caught up in his partner, in the foxtrot, the tango, and then another waltz. He must have understood what Dushan wanted of him; he did not look towards him even once.

Yamin danced with surprising lightness, artfully even, and Vazira was no less skilful than her partner. Perhaps that was what enraged Dushan.

“I’ll just go and remind him,” he thought, and started off determinedly through the crowd of dancers. On the tip of his tongue was that piece of low, scurvy mockery—“Yamin, Yamin, remember! Amen.” -a phrase with which he would shame, disgrace his rival and free himself of jealousy and anger. And once freed, would feel himself victorious.

The thing he meant to do made him bold and arrogant, and he tried to fling jokes right and left: “Mordekhai, you’re like a baby Burmese elephant”—“Let’s see you shake that artificial leg, Irod”—“Don’t get your tail caught, Rabbim.” Before saying such a thing to Yamin, he had to play out this harmless, petty, unseemly role.

Dushan moved across the dance floor, making flat jokes to the boys, winking to the girls, until suddenly he caught sight of Yamin close by. One look at him was enough to restore Dushan to his senses, to fill him with a sense of something deeper and truer than all the things which concerned him at that moment. He was conscience-stricken and saddened by the misery of the other boy, who had suffered so many injuries. His silence and wariness were like a ban, like a sacred word that must not be pronounced.

Seeing Dushan standing distraught nearby, Appak threw an arm around his shoulders and drew his friend to himself. Soon Dushan was swept up in Appak’s and Karima’s movements, in the rhythm and plasticity of their dance, with so much ardor and energy in it. His body trembled, came to life, and his muscles strained to catch the smooth cadence of the dancing couple and fall in with it.

“Step lively, Shan!” encouraged Appak. He looked at Dushan with strange, glazed eyes. He was intoxicated, reckless, withdrawn from the world around him. In the ecstasy of his flight he had even ceased to notice Karima, although he continued to dance mechanically, as if the two of them were animated by a single force. The rapture of the dancers, joined in a single rhythm, reached its sweet, narcotic climax, and everything

broke into fragments: now Dushan saw only whirlwinds moving separately, swatches of color—eyes gleaming, smiles like grimes through clenched teeth, shoulders crimson, as if electrified, the bare knees of legs which did not feel the hard floor under them.

It was all so beguiling, captivating. Shyness and hesitation were extinguished, and the dance called to Dushan, conjuring him to let down all barriers. Something inside him had fallen, been overcome, and he entered into the rhythm completely, fell in so artfully with Karima's movements that he began to come between her and Appak.

She continued to draw him on, as if lifting him to unknown heights. Everything that was alive in her, every nerve, each curve of her body, had gathered together in some elemental force, alluring, fluent, wanton but unattainable, to which Dushan longed to surrender completely, forgetting it was only the brief, sweet dream of an endless festival. He had surpassed himself, found a way out of his accustomed shell, and fused in the dance with the buoyant Appaks, Irods, and Shamils, for whom it was as easy and natural as breathing to take delight in this gracefulness, this gallantry. Reveling in his skill, Dushan forgot himself totally. He spun around and caught Karima by the waist, feeling how her body trembled like a fish, wanted to slip away but could not. She relaxed, and when they whirled round the next time their bodies were together. Feeling her scarlet, half-opened lips so close to his, the burning touch of her trembling breast, Dushan whispered with a fatal helplessness:

"Karima, I love you." No sooner had he spoken the words than he returned to himself, lost the line of his flight. What frightened and embittered him was not the capricious, wilful laughter that came in answer but the drunken falseness of his declaration.

Appak noticed Dushan's embarrassment and the way Karima was laughing nervously into his face. He hurried back to his partner and with a deft movement drew her once more into the dance, leading her away from Dushan.

For some time Dushan stood dumbfounded, not feeling the shoves the dancers gave him. Finally he turned to go towards

the door, but Vazira caught his hand.

"Come on, Dushan, dance! I saw how well you can." She leaped to his side, abandoning Yamin.

Dushan was glad that Vazira had appeared to rescue him, but try as he might to be caught up in the dance again, to lose himself, to overcome his awkwardness and return, even if only for a moment, to that intoxication, the exaltation he had felt with Karima, he could not regain his lightness and grace. Once again he felt isolated, as if he had been crumbled into a ball and expelled from the group of dancers. He thought with irritation and bitter shame of his words to Karima, and all at once he understood it all.

"It's like an enchantment," he thought. "The dance made me drunk, and I lost track of myself, dissolved. How stupid! I lost my head with Karima, didn't even know what I was saying."

"What's the matter with you? Wake up!" Vazira said reproachfully. She was sorry now she had asked Dushan to dance.

"I'm all attention." Not knowing what else to do, Dushan pressed her cold, trembling hand to his chest. "Forgive me..." But before he finished speaking Shamil's voice—or maybe it was Damirali's—came from the back of the room: "Yamin, Yamin, remember! Amen." Then there was a commotion, the sound of running feet, and Yamin's hysterical shriek: "Leave me alone, you pigs!"

"What happened?" Vazira asked. She was surprised to find that Dushan was leading her straight for the door, shoving the other couples aside. "Was that Yamin I heard?"

"No. Let's take a little walk, and then we'll come back and find him. I promise," said Dushan. They went out into the courtyard, and he breathed in the fresh evening air.

Several other couples had left the room as well. They sat in various dark spots around the playing field, on logs and sawhorses. Dushan looked at them and laughed:

"We're not original. So... Let's find a sawhorse too."

"I don't mind." Vazira could not hide her pleasure, but she added, clearly hoping to make Dushan jealous, "but not for

long. Yamin will be looking for me.”

“All right,” agreed Dushan. He felt no jealousy, no interest in the girl. Finding a sawhorse, they sat down on the cold cross-beam.

Dushan could not find anything to say. He was still stinging from Karima’s cynical laughter. Was he really so clumsy and dull in comparison with Appak that she could not even imagine ... that she had felt insulted by his confession?

“Maybe you would like to say something?” Vazira said sul-kily. “At least you could say goodnight. We’ll be leaving soon now.”

“Leaving?” asked Dushan, as if surprised. Then he hastily pulled Vazira to himself, her frail, submissive body, and kissed her on the lips. But he did not feel anything, only a salty taste in his mouth.

Vazira trembled from the unexpectedness of it, and then looked at him radiantly, joyfully. She chided him coquettishly for his impatience and bumbling, and put her arms around his neck.

“I don’t feel anything for her,” flashed through Dushan’s mind. “I don’t love her.” Solemnly, as if she had practiced this motion, Vazira lifted up on tiptoe and puckered her lips. Dushan close his eyes resignedly, but before their lips met there was a sudden noise and rush in the courtyard.

“The dance is over,” Dushan said. He and Vazira looked at each other, embarrassed, as boys and girls rushed out in pairs. Among them was Yamin, alone, searching everywhere with tragic eyes for Vazira.

“That’s Yamin,” said Dushan, forcing himself to be calm.

“Let’s hide,” whispered Vazira conspiratorially. But Dushan pretended not to have heard and ran towards his friend.

“Yamin! ” he shouted from a long ways off, waving his arms. “Vazira is waiting for you! ”

Yamin ran to him, breathing rapidly with excitement. He looked piercingly at Dushan, as if he were trying to catch him in something shameful.

“She doesn’t know? Didn’t find out?” he whispered hopelessly.

“Nothing—I swear! Not about the fight, or the reason for all the noise, or the mean thing Shamil was yelling.” Dushan looked straight into the other boy’s eyes, but did not notice the marks the fight had left on his face.

“Does she like me?” Yamin asked suddenly. But without waiting for an answer he ran happily towards the playing field.

Dushan felt the tension leaving him. He wanted solitude and quiet, and did not even go out to the bus to see the girls off.

The boys returned to the dormitory noisy and excited, and until dawn could not calm down. They talked about the day when they would travel to Tashlak to return the visit, and about their girls, repeating the names like a spell, fearing they would forget them before their next meeting. And they laughed and scoffed at the boys who had been unlucky.

None of this concerned or excited Dushan. He only thought as he fell asleep: “Maybe the good things in people, the pure things, have to be discovered little by little. It’s hard to find the patience. But vices attract because they are on the surface, accessible.” And in the middle of the night, when he was awakened by the talking in the dormitory, his earlier thought was continued by a strange intuition: “Vazira’s lips aren’t even open, and they taste salty. Gulsum has been without any protection at all for a long time, and she rubs creams and powder into her vices.” This idea shocked Dushan wide awake. He stretched towards Appak’s bed and whispered:

“Let’s go to Gulsum’s house tomorrow, Pak. What do you say?”

Appak sneered, but then softened his refusal by lying down in Dushan’s bed and giving him a hug.

“What’s so interesting about that witch, Gulsum? There are so many beautiful girls that love us. I’m going to visit Karima tomorrow. Do you want to come with me? If you don’t like Vazira you can pick out another one. You’re like a gold piece for any girl, Shan. They just want to try you, get you between their teeth.”

“I just want to find out if it’s Bolotaliev that goes to see her

or who," Dushan said, fighting down his resentment.

"Why should you care if the Devil goes to see her? Forget about all that, rise above it." Appak kept silent for a little while before going on in a different, passionate voice: "And you know, Shan, you ought to be careful. I've wanted to tell you for a long time. You always feel drawn to whatever is dangerous. You're so quiet and sensible, but then all of a sudden you pull something that's just crazy."

"What are you talking about?" Dushan asked angrily and moved away from Appak. His friend, not wanting to start a fight at such an inconvenient time, got up in silence.

The next night Appak and Irod put dummies in their beds and set off for Tashlak. They hoped they would be able to hitch a ride, but if not they would go on foot—they calculated that in five hours they could cover thirty kilometers, walking fast, and see their girls towards the morning, at least. And after them the other boys as well traveled in the darkness, two by two. The boys did not forget their sweethearts, and their teachers, who once had been known as progressives, did not forget the land of Zarmitan, which seemed to them ideal for settling down peacefully and permanently.

One at a time they left their cold gallery and began to build houses, mainly with the bricks that were dug up in the vacant lot. Tomato-Rott, Kushakov, and Serdolyuk worked slowly and methodically, laying foundations and raising walls in the hours between lessons. But Bolotaliev was impatient, his fervor for building knew no bounds: once he even decided to put his class to work. The boys were noisy and restless, they seemed simply incapable of settling down in their places. Finally Bolotaliev shouted:

"I see you're not in the mood today to work with your brains. Yes? In that case I invite you to join me in the vacant lot. You can work with your muscles instead."

"Which, of course, is more beneficial than all this knowledge and science," Dushan sang out. He remained seated, looking imperturbably at the boys hurrying towards the door.

"So you're not coming with us, Temuri?" There was displeasure, even anger, in Bolotaliev's voice.

"No, I think I'll try a little brain work." Dushan looked stubbornly back at his teacher. "If that doesn't work I'll try wiggling my ears. But I have no intention of moving a muscle."

"Yes, you Bukharans are always afraid of dirtying your lily-white hands." Bolotaliev turned sharply and went out. He did not even close the door after him.

Dushan was galled by Bolotaliev's tone of voice, his threatening look. He flipped through his astronomy textbook and then opened his literature reader, but he could not settle down.

He ran out into the courtyard, slamming the door. Not knowing what to do, he strolled in the direction of the third courtyard. Just as he was about to come out of the corridor he was noticed by Pai-Khambarov from his office window. The director was in the habit of gazing out at the end of the corridor when he was not busy. If a boy appeared who interested him for some reason he would tap on his window, summoning him for a talk. He might launch into all sorts of subjects: What grade are you in? What do your parents do? Do you have a brother? Why does he go to an ordinary day-school, instead of our boarding school? But the most frequent question was: Do you like it here? When did you start liking it better? To which the flatterers would answer glibly:

"When you became director, Amin Tursunovich."

Pai-Khambarov, frowning, would dismiss such palaver with a tired wave of his hand:

"Really, what's the need for that?" he would say. "You haven't seen anything of life yet, so to speak, and here you are busily currying favor. Where does this sort of behavior come from? It isn't inborn, is it? Then how are we teachers to combat it, to correct it? We have no access to the secrets of gene engineering."

Pai-Khambarov was pleased to see Dushan—it was difficult to talk with him, but always interesting. He never failed to say something different, and at times his words were biting, almost impudent. Pai-Khambarov wanted to capture the initiative, and so as soon as Dushan opened the office door and looked at the

director he said chidingly:

“You’re always so worried, Temuri. The cares of the world, right?”

The sally was so unexpected that Dushan did not know how to explain his annoyance, or whether to explain it at all.

“Tell me the truth, Temuri. Has there been a single day in your years here when you’ve been happy? Pleased?” Pai-Khambarov sensed that he had perhaps taken the wrong tone—a little too abrasive, belittling. This was no way to win Dushan over, get him to be forthright.

“It seems from the way you are talking that you mean to give me my diploma and character reference this evening,” Dushan said glumly. He pretended not to notice Pai-Khambarov’s gesture inviting him to sit down.

“Suppose that were so. Right! Let’s say that this very evening I had to write up your character reference.” Pai-Khambarov was delighted that their conversation had turned in this direction, which seemed to him more propitious. “And remember that the reference will follow you for the rest of your life—in the army, in further education, at your job...”

Dushan, still unable to understand where this conversation was headed, averted his eyes, as if he suddenly felt ashamed for Pai-Khambarov.

“I don’t know. But I think I would write something else about myself. Not better—just different.”

This was the sort of answer Pai-Khambarov had been expecting: unanticipated, challenging. He half-stood, even, in his satisfaction, trying to think of something Dushan would appreciate, something to capture his sympathy.

“You mean to say we don’t understand you properly? We, your teachers, who are thinking about you even while you sleep? Why such pessimism? I understand, of course, that just now you’re depressed. You’re at a critical age. Everyone goes through crises periodically: the individual, families, even the community as a whole. The first crisis in a man’s life comes at your age, fourteen or fifteen, the second, around thirty, and so on.” Pai-Khambarov paused to take a look at Dushan. He wanted to know what sort of an impression his words were making,

but he was unable to make out any emotion on the boy's face. He added in a disappointed voice: "But there's no reason for you to feel so alone. All of you boys who are going through this crisis are under our special observation. You can't deny that over that past three or four years life here at the school has changed completely. People have improved. The fear is gone, the talebearing and the toadying. No one comes running to the director to inform on his classmates. Everything is based on trust now, on respect for the teacher. And even if there are some negative... Why aren't you in class, for instance?"

During Pai-Khambarov's monologue Dushan had relaxed, let his guard down, soothed by the unhurried, kindly voice. This unexpected question made him squirm.

"I refused to go and dig bricks," he said angrily. "For Botaliev. All the others went. I was the only one who stayed behind."

"The only one? You alone, of the whole class, refused?" Pai-Khambarov was incredulous but then, as if he suddenly understood, gave a laugh and stepped towards Dushan, wanting to get a better look at this bold fellow. The director was still tall, unstooped, but his figure had filled out a little. "Everyone else went along, but he refuses. Pride, a matter of conscience. Yes, Temuri, it's clear you were born to be an anvil, not a hammer. It's the harder path in life, but the more admirable. As old Goethe says: 'Man thinks it more honorable and desirable to be a hammer, rather than an anvil. But still, what strength it requires within to bear those endless, implacable blows.' "

"Yes," Dushan answered with ironic pathos. "But what fine hammers anvils make when they crack!"

"Possibly, possibly..." Pai-Khambarov had decided to bring down the level of the conversation to save its pedagogical value. "I respect the scepticism which is natural at your age. But permit me..." He turned to the door with a displeased look, forced to break off his thought. Tomato-Rott burst into the office, exclaiming before he was well over the threshold:

"Amin Tursunovich! In all my years of teaching I have never seen the like of this!" Noticing Dushan, he bent to whisper in

Pai-Khambarov's ear. Dushan, tense with foreboding, was only able to make out isolated words on the teacher's moving lips: "Yamin", "fight", and "duty".

Pai-Khambarov seemed indignant not so much at the incident as at Tomato-Rott's murmuring. Not waiting for the teacher to finish, he moved off and sat in the director's chair.

"There's no reason to make a secret of this matter, Alfred Ivanovich." He indicated Dushan. "I am sure that they have already heard all about it. So let us have no whispering, if you please. And if this happened during your duty period, you must be self-critical."

But Alfred Ivanovich, instead of becoming self-critical, suddenly grew spiteful. He straightened his tie and coughed ponderously in preface to making his report:

"I wish to inform you, Amin Tursunovich, that this morning a ninth-grader, Yamin Bazarov, was involved in a fight and accidentally, as he claims, fell and hurt his arm. He was taken to Zarmitan hospital. His condition, according to the doctor, is satisfactory." And then, his formality breaking down: "Shocking, I must say..."

The desolation that descended on Dushan drove him out of the office. He heard Pai-Khambarov comment: "And we were just speaking of the critical age." But perhaps he only imagined that. Dushan was so agitated he did not even notice the playing field as he ran past or the wall as he jumped across it into the backstreets of Zarmitan.

Now his spirits soared, as if he had risen above the earth's darkness. There was a brightness in him; he had opened up for new understanding, new depths of feeling. Absorbed in the joy and suffering that had seized him, he was not surprised or alarmed when he met the woodcutters, the matchoi. With their long axes pressed to their shoulders like rifles, they raced across the road, smiling into their red beards, as women standing beside distant gates cried:

"Vagabonds, robbers! Turn away for a moment and they'll steal the washing off your line. Yawn and they'll corrupt your daughter. It's all the same to them."

Something from the distant past, something cherished, came

back to Dushan as he looked at the men's faces, at their yellow, worn-out boots. But it was all in some sort of fog.

He was refused admittance to the ward, but Yamin must have heard him pleading with the doctor. A shout came from the window:

"Shan, is that you? Go around to the courtyard."

Dushan pulled himself up onto the window sill and was struck by the acrid air of the ward. But he hung on, his weight supported by his elbows. He immediately caught sight of Yamin among the others, being driven back to his bed by the nurse. Yamin did not seem to be in pain at all; his pale face was calm.

"How did you manage... You numbskull," was all Dushan could say.

"Now no one will make fun of me any more. I showed them!" Yamin frowned, remembering past injuries, but quickly continued in a joking manner: "Hurray for me! Hurray!"

The cheers struck Dushan like a wave. He swayed, unable to hold himself any longer on his numb elbows, and jumped back down. As he was going past the bazaar on his way back he saw an excited group of boys running in his direction and turned off to hide behind the bazaar's gates. He did not want the others to stop and ask him questions. It was as if by going alone to visit Yamin he had done something dishonorable.

The boys would have left the vacant lot by now, and it was possible for Dushan to return to the school by the shortest route. It was getting towards evening, and all the industrious diggers--the citizens of the town as well as the boys from the school--had abandoned their trenches, burrows, and foxholes. The night fog would cover them, hiding the mice, hedgehogs, devils, and dragons lying at their bottoms. And in the morning, when the excavators once more began to ply their shovels, their nostrils would be tickled with a mousey odor.

"Someday our house will sink into the earth too," thought Dushan. "And when they dig it up to haul away the bricks and logs and gates, our rings, buttons, needles, and spittoons, many houses will be built in its place. Cramped, with sloping roofs, like Gulsum's house."

Somewhere around the middle of the lot Dushan suddenly heard a voice. He thought that the boys must be trying to play a trick on him, scare him, and so he headed unswervingly to the pit with a jagged edge, which looked as if it had been dug with a mechanical scoop rather than with shovels, in the manner of the old days. Dushan had noticed the pit long before, but this was the first time he had seen it close up. He expected that at any moment the boys would leap out of it with a shout, and Appak, finding no sign of fright on Dushan's face, would say disappointedly: "He's a sphinx." And so as not to seem cold and sphinxlike when there was no need, Dushan stopped before he came to the edge and shouted:

"It's no use hiding in there. I see you. Come on out, I'm not in the mood." He had to force himself to shout that: he really did not want to see anyone, to play games.

But it was not the sphinxes who were to be hidden by the night fog who looked out of the pit in surprise but the two woodcutters. They were chewing something. Dushan, taken aback, not knowing what to say, squatted down and asked guiltily:

"Are you headed for Bukhara?"

"Yes. What makes you ask?" said the one that Dushan had, for some reason, remembered better after his fleeting glimpse of the afternoon. Now, replying to the unpremeditated question, he seemed rather frightening.

"Take me with you." Dushan felt that after striking up a conversation, asking this question, he was bound to them. He did not want to seem just idly curious, especially in his embarrassment at taking the woodcutters for boys.

"Why come with us?" asked the man who had seemed frightening a moment before. Now Dushan felt a liking for him. He had an unusual face for those parts: no cheekbones and a straight nose above his red beard. No wonder Dushan had remembered him. "You can get on a bus and be there in half an hour." But looking into the boy's face and finding nothing of the vagabond or thief in it, the woodcutter decided not to hurt him with rough, curt phrases. Everything about Dushan, this decent, honest boy, pleaded for sympathy and help. "We'll

be a long time getting there. A year, maybe. We'll stop to work in all the houses along the way."

"And I want it to take a long time—all winter, all summer." Dushan spoke rapidly. It seemed to him that only by being open and trusting could he find favor with the men. "My family home is in Bukhara. My brother is getting married. And I think my mother will remarry, too. An old man Nabi-Zade. She's not even forty."

And indeed the things Dushan said and his manner pleased the woodcutters. They invited him down into the pit, where they were eating supper—bread and boiled meat. They looked him over interestedly and laughed in his face at his oddness, continuing to chew.

"You're a funny one," said the younger woodcutter cheerily, the one Dushan still had no liking for even though he seemed kind and well-disposed to him. "Boys your age think about different things. Interesting things—girls, motorbikes. And here you're moping about your family home, as if life had cast you off, left you behind." He offered Dushan bread and a slice of meat.

Dushan lifted the bread to take a bite, feeling hunger, but stopped himself, thinking it would be impolite to talk with a full mouth.

"Don't know how it will be at home," he said. "But it will be different. Because I'm different." He fell silent, noticing the attention with which the men listened. He was bewildered, he was saying the wrong thing. Now he had taken a liking to the younger woodcutter too, and he knew it was wrong to speak like this to people you liked—loosely and uninterestingly, not saying what you really meant. Up to now their conversation had seemed haphazard, like their meeting, like his question: "Are you headed for Bukhara?"

Dushan looked up out of the pit and peered around. He took a deep breath of the cool evening air and said:

"I like being with you." These were the words that at last seemed to him truthful, exact. It was as if all of their preceding conversation and questions had settled into the depths of his mind, the meagre expression of something treasured.

"Well, it's fine that you like it here," said the younger man, yawning. "But what can you do? Can you clean outhouses? Can you keep an eye on unfaithful wives? They make us do that too. You don't know how to lie and cheat at the bazaar, do you?"

"Keep an eye on unfaithful wives?" Dushan laughed. "What would be the good of that?" He relaxed, feeling more at ease, and was about to take a bite of bread when he heard footsteps. His whole body tensed.

He peeped out and saw Appak, about ten paces away, bending down to pick up a shovel that seemingly had been dropped in haste. Appak moved off into the darkness and then Irod emerged, also looking for something.

Dushan waited, expecting Mordekhai to appear. He was the only one Dushan wanted to see, although they had never been friends, never been close to one another.

"Well, and how do you think you'll be received when you get home?" asked the woodcutter as if he had only just noticed the school uniform Dushan was wearing.

"Without any fuss," Dushan answered carelessly, as if now everything had been decided, understood, and they had begun a game that would make it easier for the three of them to live together. "My father will see me coming and be glad. He'll call for the neighbors. My brother will see them killing a calf for me, the stranger, the cold-hearted son, and he will reproach Father. But Father will tell him: 'Do not be angry. All that is mine will be yours. But this son was dead, and has returned to life.'"

"Then let's go and eat that calf!" The woodcutters laughed and got up heavily, with full bellies. One of them held out his axe for Dushan to carry.

He pressed the axe to his shoulder, feeling the cold of the steel pierce him to his toes. To warm himself he jumped across the pit and sang that song, the thing he remembered from all he had lived through:

*Ah, I have all that I want, all that I need.
I have my two arms and the strength in them.*

He glanced around at the outline of the school, which stood on high ground. He heard no sound, no rustling, no crumbling of its walls. But Prince Arif's house moved away and blended into the darkness more suddenly than Dushan had expected, its contours glimmering with a strange, dull light as if it were covered with glow-worms, shells, phosphorescent fish, bats, fire-breathing dragons, devils who had gulped down flames and were slowly digesting them inside.

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Тимур Пулатов
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Повесть, рассказ и роман
На английском языке

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